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Is there a gang problem here?

(<http://www.southtownstar.com/neighborhoodstar/chicagoheights/1399528,012909cheisenberg.article>)

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By Paul Eisenberg

I was covering Sauk Village's annual summer festival a couple of months ago when I received a not-so-cryptic warning from a woman selling ice cream from a truck. She told me not to stick around after dark because of "the gangs."

The hours I spent at the festival had been pleasant despite buckets of rain that marred the weekend for festival organizers and residents alike. Smiles were evident and genuine among the few hearty souls who came out to take advantage of nonexistent lines for carnival rides and to share in the community spirit that these events engender. I saw no signs of gang behavior.

Still, I know better than to discount reports from people like the ice cream truck woman. In terms of being close to the proverbial pulse of a community, those who drive ice cream trucks are probably tuned in more than those in any other profession. Day after day, they drive down each street scanning the horizon for prospective customers. They pose no threat to lawbreakers and thus probably witness more of what really happens on our streets every day than even our police officers.

Like most of us, I prefer to focus on the idyllic side of suburbia. Our towns remain places where families, not miscreants, rule the streets and where each of us gets a fair chance to pursue our own brand of happiness. So I was a bit surprised by the warning I received. But at the same time, having grown up in the south suburbs and having spent a large chunk of my adult life here as well, it wasn't too surprising. Once, a friend of mine had been shot at by gang members after emerging onto his front porch in Chicago Heights to investigate a ruckus outside.

Yet I'm lucky enough to have grown up in a neighborhood where strife was caused not by wearing the wrong colors or trespassing on someone else's territory, but rather over who got to be Luke Skywalker or Han Solo in our latest game of "Star Wars." And I want the same for my kindergarten-age son, who is now experiencing a range of influences at school that I have no control over.

So to gauge exactly how severe the gang problem is in my town, I attended a gang awareness program last week presented by Detective Gerald Ruff of the Steger Police Department. As the department's juvenile specialist, and as someone who often can be found at Bloom Trail High School, he's got his finger on the pulse of gang activity in our neck of the woods. Some of the information he presented was quite chilling.

Though horrifying, a video of a teenager removing 16 concealed firearms from his baggy clothing, and displays of knives hidden in commonplace items such as combs and pens weren't the scariest portion of the program for me. It was one line: "Fourth-graders teach me a lot about gangs," Ruff said.

As the guy who runs the D.A.R.E. program in my son's school as well as other grade schools in Steger and South Chicago Heights, I have to take him at face value. He undoubtedly knows more about the issue than I do. At the same time, fourth-graders, in my mind, should know less about gangs than Ruff or me. In an ideal world, the bad guys they should be most concerned with are those who Spider-Man fights in the movies.

It's easy to shrug off gangs as somebody else's problem. I haven't had any personal experience with them, my one run-in with gang graffiti came when I lived downstate. And living in Steger, it would also be easy to see gangs as a Sauk Village or Chicago Heights problem. But Ruff's presentation shattered those preconceptions. Four kids who Ruff got to know when they were students in my son's school district were shot in gang violence last year, two of them fatally, he said. And because school districts often encompass several towns, kids from towns where gangs are a larger presence are bringing their knowledge and affiliation to school and sharing that information and allegiance with kids from areas where the proverbial grass is greener.

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Ruff shared a Web site, www.chicagogangs.org, which lists known gang presence in the suburbs. On the list aren't just the usual suspects, but also Crete and Flossmoor. Further afield, even the prestigious "Parks" - Orland, Tinley and Palos - aren't immune. While Steger isn't listed on the site, Ruff said he's working to get updated information listed there.

While it's nice to think of the town one lives in as free of such distressing elements such as gangs, it's ultimately delusional. If people look the other way, it gives gang members more shadows to lurk in, bringing with them vandalism, narcotics abuse and territorial violence.

While the police in all of our towns are trying to stop the spread of gangs in our area, it's ultimately up to us as parents and community members to be aware of what our children are doing, and who they are hanging out with.

Ruff said he hopes to host more gang awareness programs as time goes by, and if so, and if there are similar programs being hosted in other towns, I urge everybody to attend.

And check out www.chicagogangs.org and click on "the suburbs," too. It will give you a good idea of what gangs are where, and what to look for in terms of clothing and other identifiers to see just what might be going on right here in our own back yards.

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