

Violence rules during gang initiation week

By **Lou Michel**, News Staff Reporter
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Innocent people often pay the price when Buffalo street gangs look to replenish their ranks.

There's the Delaware Park in-line skater who was beaten and robbed, the man recovering from a bullet wound to the neck and a woman who narrowly escaped a carjacking.

All are believed to be the random victims of gang initiations that require prospective gang members to commit robberies or other acts of violence to prove they are worthy of membership, according to police.

On the streets, they call it "gang week."

The latest rash of attacks, authorities say, may be connected to a Central Park neighborhood gang that's believed to have held tryouts the week of July 11.

Apparently, some of the gang's candidates flunked the test.

Michael E. Holley, 17, was arrested along with two other young people at 4 a.m. July 16 in a failed carjacking at Nottingham Terrace and Delaware Avenue, police said.

When questioned by investigators, Holley allegedly told them he had participated in another robbery of an in-line skater at 11:30 p.m. July 14 on Delaware Park's Ring Road.

His confession, police said, resulted in additional charges of second-degree robbery and third-degree assault for attacking the skater.

During the investigation, police received information that the Central Park gang was seeking new members to bolster its ranks, which have been thinned by arrests and deadly street violence.

Police also suspect a gang initiation turned violent at about 10:40 p.m. July 15, when a young man was shot in the neck while sitting in a car on

Grider Street, near Leroy Avenue. He remains in stable condition in Erie County Medical Center.

The violence has not stopped since the gang week initiations ended. On July 21, three Central Park gang members attacked a LaSalle Avenue woman and her two teenage nephews at the University Metro Rail Station. While the three were carrying out the assault, police said, they shouted "Central Park for life," which is believed to be a reference to their gang.

The suspected attackers were later caught by transit police officers and charged with gang assault and disorderly conduct.

Occasionally, a gang wannabe will actually apologize to the victim as he carries out his crime, saying he is sorry or that he is under orders, police say.

Buffalo Police Commissioner Daniel Derenda declined to comment specifically on the recent gang week initiations but said the department considers any gang activity a serious threat and does everything it can to dismantle gangs.

"We've heard some of the rumors about gang week, and we're investigating. We are tracking gangs with the regional intelligence center, and we're making arrests every day of gang members and moving them off the street," the commissioner said Thursday.

The department's Mobile Response Unit and district patrol officers also are keeping a closer watch on suspected gangs in order to clamp down on the violence.

That violence turned deadly at 11:45 p.m. July 20 in a gang-related double shooting on the 200 block of Walden Avenue. Damion Diggs, 17, was fatally shot, and a man believed to be a passer-by suffered a minor wound to his left leg.

Within hours, homicide detectives arrested and charged two suspects.

And while the murder was not associated with gang week activities, community activists say reports of gang recruitment should send a strong signal to parents that they need to be more proactive to make sure their children are not lured into the thug life.

"If you don't want to be sitting in court watching a trial in which your son is charged with murder, find out what your kids are up to, where they are, who they are with and the parents of who they are with," said Arlee Daniels, the newly elected chairman of the Stop The Violence Coalition.

Derenda adds there are other grim possibilities besides court.

"Parents could end up sitting in a hospital or at the morgue," he said.

In keeping tabs on children, police say, it is important for parents to not simply settle for the nicknames of their children's companions, but to demand a complete name. That way, if something bad happens, the parent has more to go on.

For parents who feel they are unable to control their children, Daniels suggests letting his organization have a try at working with the youngsters.

"If you have the gang atmosphere in and around your house, and you're not able to do anything about it, we ask that you give Stop The Violence a call and let us try to intervene," he said.

There is, he explained, strength in numbers.

From 2 to 6 p.m. Saturday in Martin Luther King Park, the Stop The Violence Coalition plans another of a string of summer rallies to promote safe communities.

The coalition calls its effort "No Child Left Behind -- Where Is Yours?" a pointed approach, Daniels said, to get parents to think about their responsibilities.

"We'll be handing out pamphlets and brochures from agencies in Buffalo that deal with parenting issues, conflict resolution, mentoring, life-management skills and general education diplomas," he said. The aim is to get young people on track to productive lives.

The coalition can be reached at 882-7882.

Something as simple as a summer job also can change the course of a young person's life, authorities say.

Earlier this week at a half-acre, weed- and litter-strewn lot at Genesee and Moselle streets, about 15 teenagers and young adults quickly transformed

the property from an eyesore to clean and presentable property, using weed whackers, power mowers and rakes.

Among them was Michael Schaef, a former gang member, who credited Darnell Jackson, founder of the East Side Redevelopment Task Force, with giving him a job.

"I used to chill on the street corner from 8 a.m. to midnight every day," the 20-year-old said, claiming gang week initiations do indeed occur. "There's so many different gangs, it's crazy, and too many people are getting killed."

Sheri McAdory, another worker, volunteered more details on gang weeks.

"They require robbing people or going into another gang's territory and causing trouble," the young woman said, rake in hand. "These jobs get us off the street and doing something positive."

"We're killing three birds with one stone [with the program,]" Jackson said. "It stops violence, gives jobs and cleans up the neighborhood." Jackson received a \$100,000 grant to fund the work of his task force.

The 10-week summer work program, he said, brings young people from different neighborhoods together and fosters friendship in positive settings.

"We're a family," one of the younger workers called out above the din of lawn mower engines. "We try to make kids off the street feel welcome."

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