

Former NFL players talk gangs and violence to Pleasantville students

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By CAITLIN DINEEN Staff Writer

PLEASANTVILLE — Gangs, drug abuse and violence are frequent problems in Pleasantville, where teachers got help from two former NFL players Monday in a program they hope will help their students choose a better path.

“We’re definitely dealing with those issues,” Pleasantville Middle School Student Assistance Counselor Mary Gillespie said.

Students at the school were told the cold, hard truth of consequences that can arise from being part of a gang, committing acts of violence, taking drugs or bullying other students.

The message from the Steered Straight program was loud and clear Monday: stay the course, avoid trouble and accept the consequences of your actions. The nonprofit program visits schools in New Jersey to talk to students about life choices.

Thomas Tapeh, a former fullback with the Philadelphia Eagles, said the program was important no matter how many children the message reaches.

“If you can help one or two, you did a good job,” Tapeh said following the sixth-grade portion of the program.

If words weren’t enough, students also were exposed to images of a dozen teenagers who have committed suicide as a result of being bullied or have been incarcerated for drug or murder charges.

“A lot of the time you make decisions and choices that you don’t even contemplate the consequences,” Steered Straight President Michael DeLeon said. “All you have in life are the decisions and choices that you make.”

DeLeon spoke to students from experience. He spent 10 years in a state prison in connection to a suburban homicide. As a former gang member, DeLeon sat

behind bars thinking about the moment that gothim confined to the small, white cell.

"I watch one of my friends shoot another one of my friends in the head," he said to the cafeteria of silent and stunned sixth-graders.

He told the students about his life and how he turned to drugs and violence instead of studying and continuing his education.

"Being an ex-con, that never goes away," DeLeon said. "Being associated with gangs never expires."

John Fuqua, a former teacher and part of the Steered Straight program, recalled Christmas Eve 2008 when



his nephew died after being shot in the back three times during a gang-related fight. Fuqua, of Bridgeton, was referring to the incident that occurred five minutes away from his home in the Bridgeton Villas apartment complex.

Additionally, his mother died the same night after suffering a massive heart attack when she was rushing to where her grandson lay dying on the ground.

It was a Christmas he'll never forget, he said.

The program was not just about scaring youths, but also about showing them how staying on the straight and narrow can result in a higher level of success than they could have ever dreamed for themselves.

Hank Poteat, formerly of the New England Patriots, and Tapeh told students they kept their focus when they were growing up, stayed in school and worked toward the overall end goal.

That's how they got to where they are today, they said. And how they both won Super Bowl rings.

Both Poteat and Tapeh told students they had to constantly work hard to prove themselves worthy of being on the turf and suiting up every game.

Even after breaking both feet playing college football and being told by recruiters he did not deserve to be scouted, Tapeh took the field and knew it was his life decisions that got him there.

"I didn't get there overnight," he said. "It was a whole lot of work."

Poteat agreed, saying that no matter what Pleasantville children want to be when they grow up, they can achieve it if they work for it.

"When you go the extra mile, you do the small things," he said. "If you don't set goals, we have nothing to work for."

Both told the pupils that setbacks happen and that, although they can be discouraging, the children should never give up.

After the program, students said they were glad to hear from role models who have a track record of success and thought it made their goals look attainable.

Shaniyah Bumpass, 11, said she enjoyed the program and was most affected when Fuqua spoke of losing his nephew and mother the same night.

"I thought that was sad for him," Bumpass said, adding that her grandfather had a heart attack that killed him as well. "It was sad because you can feel that type of pain in a person."

Bumpass said she has big plans for her life and none of them involves being associated with the wrong crowd.

"I'm not in a gang. I'm trying to get my grades up," she said. "I'm trying to not do things I'm not supposed to do."

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