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## Inmates' stories aim to set teens straight

By Ashley Meeks Sun-News reporter  
 Article Launched: 11/04/2007 12:00:00 AM MDT

To view a document from Operation No Gangs, click [here](#).

LAS CRUCES - It was at the Dream Center, so it was only appropriate that the 120 teenagers in the audience were talking about their dreams on Saturday. One girl wanted to go into crime-scene investigation. Another planned to be a doctor. One boy said he wanted to be a chemist.

As she listened, La Tuna Federal Correctional Facility administrator Maxine Griego paced the stage in front of a seated panel of five shackled, brown-suited inmates. And she didn't mince words when it came to the futures of some of the other teens in attendance.

"You think you're warriors. I see the way you dress," she said, pointing out embroidered caps and sagging jeans. "Do you really think you're fooling anyone? I look at you and I tell you, you're cowards."

While the third annual regional youth summit was, by title, focused on preventing meth use and suicide, it was gang-related violence and the consequences of poor choices that was the overriding theme. Amanda Lopez, a school mental-health advocate with the New Mexico Department of Health, said all the teens had at least one thing

in

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common - a crossroads.

"The overall message is self-care, taking care of yourself and taking care of others," Lopez said. "They have the opportunity to go down the right path."

In other words, get your head on straight now or you might end up like the men on the stage.

"Some of it is scare tactics, but that what kids need sometime," Lopez said. "These inmates ... being in shackles, they can't even go to the bathroom by themselves. That's a very concrete reality."

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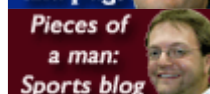
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So were the other facts Griego elicited from her panel, who had been convicted of crimes ranging from conspiracy to drug trafficking. One man hadn't chewed gum since 2005. Another hadn't opened a refrigerator door since 1997. Their dreams? Getting out. Hugging their mothers tight. And going to the bathroom with the door closed.

**Rob Gallardo**, an El Paso crisis-intervention specialist, said the problems in rural New Mexico youth culture may not be specifically meth addictions or suicides, but they are serious. People are ready to fight back - Anthony citizens are planning a night march on Dec. 1 to take back their streets.

"These kids are dying," he said - a gang-related shootings in May and one in July claimed the lives of a 17-year-old and a 14-year-old in Anthony.

Those deaths hit home with many of the teens at Saturday's summit.

Like 15-year-old Johnny Garduño. From the age of 11, the Gadsden High School sophomore had been "blinded" by the lure of gangs. But something clicked during Operation No Gangs, during Red Ribbon Week at school.

"I'm out," Garduño says. "I wanted to be all cool, think I was all that," he said. He joined a group that egged houses, broke bottles, smashed windows. He would hit on command, join in when someone was jumped, stuff he now shakes his head and dismisses as simply "stupid."

Darlene Robledo and Victoria Ortegon, both 17-year-old El Paso seniors, tell similar stories of flirting with gangs. But they said seeing people lose friends and family to gang-related violence has turned them away from the scene.

Ortegon said the border culture environment can be rough - young girls get pregnant, friends overdose on heroin, others go to jail, kids try to kill themselves, they drop out of school.

"It builds and it builds and it builds," she said. To deal with that, people turn to the protection of what they think will be a solid, got-your-back gang. It's a rush, she said, until people start dying.

"My friend got stabbed to death. A girl got shot. Where's this going to take us?" she said, and answered, "It's going to take you to jail, or dead."

"You open your eyes and see your homies aren't really your homies. People start dying," Robledo said. "It's just not, there's no point to it. I think, "how stupid was I?"

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