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Alternative to gang life is about pride

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While community groups toil in the streets to reclaim young adults from the guns, drugs and death of Buffalo's gang life, the larger question is how to make such work less necessary.

The gang lifestyle described in Sunday's "Code of Blood and 'Honor' " article in The Buffalo News is a societal affliction that brings to mind medicine's mantra: Prevention beats cure.

So what should we do for the 6-, 7- and 8-year-olds growing up in such neighborhoods? Or, from the other end of the political spectrum, what should they do for themselves?

The University at Buffalo's Henry L. Taylor Jr. has a promising answer to both questions that makes education -- the ultimate self-help -- relevant on the city's toughest streets.

It's easy for folks in nice neighborhoods with responsive officials and good services to see the importance of school as self-evident. After all, it worked for them.

But Taylor, director of UB's Center for Urban Studies, has long talked about the impact of the "built environment" on perceptions, expectations and motivations. For a child going to school past boarded-up houses, overgrown vacant lots, broken sidewalks and abandoned storefronts, the message can be different: In this community, education does no good.

The East Side Neighborhood Transformation Partnership led by the UB center is working with Futures Academy School 37 in the Fruit Belt to combat that perception. The goal is to make kids "understand the history of their community . . . and how that can be connected to the present in terms of solving problems," Taylor said.

For instance, students got interested in the mulberry trees that helped give the neighborhood its name. Beyond that, they studied with Roswell Park Cancer Institute scientists and found that their berries contain more beneficial antioxidants than those in stores. Now they will identify all of the area's mulberry trees and try to harvest them for residents.

Similarly, they eyed the vacant lot across Carlton Street, which "kept saying to the kids, 'You're nothing, you're nobody. You can't change that,' " Taylor said.

So they changed it. Seventh- and eighth-graders worked with UB grad students to design and develop a garden across from the school. They worked with the Locust Street Art Project to design a mural for the school's

entrance, and they spearhead a neighborhood cleanup each spring. All to make a difference in the community.

Equally important, it makes a difference in the kids. Futures Principal

Deana Stevenson marvels at middle school students who now chastise one another

for walking over a piece of paper without picking it up. "There's more of a connection between the school and the community," she said.

Does this approach work long-term? The center is designing a survey to assess academic improvement. As for keeping these kids out of gangs, it's too soon to know. But common sense suggests the answer. "If kids have pride in the community -- not abstract pride, but concrete pride -- that they're making a difference, . . . the anger that is channeled into gangs will be channeled in a much more positive way," Taylor said.

The Fruit Belt effort has worked on a shoestring budget. Taylor wants to start a bigger project around Martin Luther King Jr. Park and make it something to replicate, working with the Community Action Organization, the Brown administration, block clubs and others.

"The gang piece, if you look at it closely, the thing that stands out the most is that the kids want to belong," Taylor said. "They want to be part of something bigger than themselves."

Helping UB create that "something" should be a no-brainer.

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