

# Anti-snitching effort puts folks at risk

By Angela Lindsay  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

For as long as there has been crime in the streets, there has been a code of silence in the streets. You break that code — you could get hurt or killed. Now, the reach of that code is at an all-time high (or low, depending on how you view it), and this once unspoken rule is being broadcast loudly and clearly.

Lines of tee-shirts that boldly state, "Stop Snitchin'," "Ditches Are For Snitches," "Snitches Get Stitches" and any number of similar sentiments have swept across America, particularly within the Black community, "encouraging" residents to mind their business when it comes to police investigations. Their rapidly growing popularity has helped propel the anti-snitch movement, if you will, from Main Street to the mainstream, making the job of

law enforcement in many cities even more difficult than before. In fact, a judge in Massachusetts had to ban the shirts from a courtroom earlier this year because of the intimidating effect they were having on witnesses.

The widely available 'snitch' shirts can often be seen in music videos, CD covers and hip-hop posters, and the message is often heard in the lyrics of some of today's hottest rappers. The plight of some rappers lately has been a lesson in life imitating art.

Currently, rapper Busta Rhymes (given name Trevor Smith), is being sought by the NYPD to disclose information concerning the shooting death of his bodyguard Israel Ramirez. He has remained defiantly mute. Another high profile case involving Brooklyn Rapper Lil' Kim ended with the rapper being sentenced to 366

days in a Philadelphia prison for choosing to lie to a grand jury instead of snitching on members of her entourage believed to have been in a shootout with a rival group.

Both Busta Rhymes and Lil' Kim have garnered an enormous amount of respect and street credibility or "street cred" for choosing to keep silent rather than cooperating with the legal system. Whatever their reasons for doing so, they no doubt realize that those who do snitch risk being labeled a 'rat' and are routinely shunned and threatened as a result.

Besides the fear of retribution, there are various other reasons why some Blacks refuse to cooperate with law enforcement. Many grow up in culture that says Blacks cannot trust the police. For some, it is purely a matter of loyalty. Others feel that they can handle the situation themselves. The adop-

tion of a 'hear no evil, see no evil' attitude is yet another reason.

Popular culture, mobster movies and TV shows, such as HBO's highly rated "The Sopranos," have reinforced and, according to some critics, even glamorized this mantra and the gangster lifestyle in general.

There is something to be said for loyalty. It can be said that the no-snitch vow grew from the roots of slavery. When working toward a greater cause, Black people banded together to protect each other out of necessity. The Underground Railroad, for instance, may very well have not flourished but for the collective secrecy amongst slaves and their desire to reach a common goal — a successful escape. Their silence, for the most part, kept that movement from being sold out. But what is the noble cause now?

I am not an advocate of the tattletale mentality, but at some point there has to arise a desire to battle the forces that are keeping the Black community in a self-destructive state. Distrust of police and the fear of retaliation by criminals are understandable. But what is the alternative?

The cycle of violence and crime will not cease if people remain silent. In fact, it will only aid in allowing innocent people to be victims and prove anti-climatic when trying to rid neighborhoods of drugs and crime.

I often hear Black people complain that the police do nothing about crime in their neighborhoods, but then they do not cooperate with investigations, and many even get irritated when they see a convoy of police cars on patrol in their neighborhoods. I understand the apprehension. There are some members of law enforcement and the le-

gal system who may be just as dirty as the criminals themselves, but it's hard to have it both ways.

Being unwilling to testify is a frustrating hurdle toward effectively policing the neighborhoods that need it most. The stop snitchin' shirts further undermine efforts to quell violence and do little to improve what is often an insecure relationship between police and some neighborhoods.

Despite what society, and often the media, would have us believe, there is a clear line of distinction between selling out and seeking justice, especially in situations where people, even whole communities, are suffering. Working toward removing negative and harmful elements from the community is not selling out. Not doing so is.

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## Center coaches youth on positive choices

By Martine Ramos  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

In the wake of recent violence perpetrated by teens upon innocent victims at a Strip hotel and other locations, the residents of the Las Vegas Valley are left wondering if these are hate crimes, gang activity or random acts of juvenile violence. The violent acts generated national notoriety because they were caught on surveillance videotape and shown on television news programs around the nation.

The attacks were apparently part of a string of several that happened Easter weekend. That the teens were Black and the crimes seemed to be against Whites fostered speculation that they could have been hate crimes.

According to news reports, there is also speculation on the part of law enforcement authorities that gang activity could have been involved because, according to a Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department spokesperson, different street gang initiation rituals call for acts of violence in the form of beatings, rapes and possible shootings.

Long gone are the days where the perpetrators of violence or gang members are thought to be from certain underprivileged and central-urban areas of the valley, or teen criminals to be from at-risk schools. Less-urban areas are no longer safe from



Sentinel-Voice file photo

Youth dancers perform at the West Las Vegas Theatre to keep active and out of trouble.

the infiltration of violence.

The fact is that any area can spawn gang activity and violent teens and adolescents come from a variety of neighborhoods, income levels, backgrounds, ages and ethnicities.

Until the violent teens are brought to trial and the truth is revealed, speculation is speculation. The problem still exists, and concentrated effort and teamwork needs to be placed on banding together to help reduce the incidences of juvenile violence and criminal activity.

Cooperation among school authorities, police officials, government adminis-

trators, churches, the media, and the community as a whole needs to come to the forefront by putting aside individual differences and prejudices, and work to make a better place to live by creating a more suitable environment for the next generation of responsible citizens.

Violence alarms the public and stirs government officials to act. Sometimes rather than focusing efforts on preventing violent crime and improving the safety of neighborhoods, elected officials propose new legal penalties for violent juveniles. This has not been proven to have much effect on public

safety or the curbing of juvenile violent crime.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, every day too many young people are caught up in conflicts that they do not know how to manage. Juvenile delinquency and violence are symptoms of youths' inability to manage conflict in their lives. Teaching young people how to manage conflict in a productive way can help reduce incidents of violent behavior. Conflict resolution education is beneficial in violence prevention in schools and communities.

Young people need to be empowered with the skills of

conflict resolution, but they also need to be taught that conflict resolution does not make up for responsibility in making correct choices.

They cannot be expected to promote and encourage the peaceful resolution of conflicts if they do not see conflict resolution being practiced by adults in all areas of their lives, such as in business, sports, entertainment, and personal relationships. Violence is not inevitable — it is a choice, and so is non-violence.

When non-violence is chosen, the results are more satisfying and normally lasting.

When it comes down to it, it is all about the choices.

Realizing that violence, for the most part, is a result of individual choices, much is already being done to ensure juveniles are equipped with the essentials necessary for making the correct choices when it comes to behavior.

The West Las Vegas Arts Center at 947 West Lake Mead Boulevard, part of the Cultural Affairs Division of the City of Las Vegas Department of Leisure Services, offers programs that target the whole person by increasing awareness of personal responsibility and knowledge of self.

The mission of the arts center is to train and develop youth and adults in the performing arts. This is done by

connecting professionals and the elders of the community with the youth of the community in a bonding process that explores and teaches most, if not all, of the skills necessary to make responsible and positive choices in life.

Upon entering the arts center, prospective users are faced with a welcoming atmosphere that at once generates a feeling of security, coupled with cultural pride that can be seen, heard and felt, as the sounds of African drums and sights of African and African-American art permeate the foyer.

"We offer classes for ages two on up in music, dance, textiles, clothing, and practically anything in the arts that there may be an interest in," said Jewel Jeppe, cultural activities specialist at the West Las Vegas Arts Center. "It is an arts-based curriculum, but we concentrate a lot on leadership skills, knowledge of self, building pride and self-esteem. We ensure that our programs generate increased awareness of what it takes to properly execute life skills."

The arts center also stresses community involvement, and concentrates much effort on the transition from adolescence to adult. The Rights of Passage for males and females emphasizes responsible sexuality and sexual maturity, grooming, hygiene, health, finances, (See Juvenile, Page 13)