

I SAVED MY SON FROM A GANG

Palm Beach Post, The (FL) (Published as The Palm Beach Post) - November 5, 1995

- Author/Byline: ANITA BOWMAN
- Edition: FINAL
- Section: OPINION
- Page: 1F

We lived in a nice community, in a comfortable home with a spacious back yard and heated pool. Around the corner was Spanish River High School, a good school where my son was a freshman. We were all so happy, living in Boca Raton. Then all hell broke loose.

In 1990, my son (who has asked me not to use his name in this story) was 13 years old.

He was also in a gang.

His friends were some of the same young men allegedly involved in the gang-related beating on Sept. 24 of 17-year-old Joey Pymm at Boca Raton's South Inlet Park, a vicious attack that left Joey in a coma until last Sunday.

When I saw the pictures in the newspaper of the six youths charged in the attack, I was horrified. These boys had been to my home. I immediately offered up one more prayer of thanks that I had interceded in my son's life when I did.

At first I was in denial, thinking, "The police must be knocking at the wrong door." Although his father and I had divorced when my son was a baby and my former husband served a prison term, I was now in a stable relationship with a man my son called "Dad." My boyfriend truly cared about my son, and we tried to have regular family discussions to work out any problems that might arise.

Then one night it happened. It was 11 p.m.; my son was unusually late coming home. I was angry and also scared that something had happened to him. I drove to the places where he was supposed to have been. When I arrived at the Town Center Mall parking lot, on Glades Road just west of Boca, I found that the police were there, having arrested two teenagers. They were questioning a younger boy who had just been beaten up.

There was talk of my son's having been involved, yet he was nowhere to be found. The police were searching for him, and I was asked to go home and wait. After what felt like an eternity, my son finally came home. He assured me he had done nothing wrong. But I took him down to the Boca Raton Police Department. There, a mediator found that he had done wrong. My son was eventually ordered to pay for a portion of the victim's medical expenses (the boy had been beaten badly enough to be treated at Boca Raton Community Hospital) and to perform 20 hours of community service.

During most of this time, I felt numb and unsure of what to believe. No way, I thought, could my son have been involved in such an awful incident! Oh, but yes, he could and had. Many months later, my son admitted that he had, in fact, beaten this boy. Gang-related? You bet!

I sought a teen/parent group. In the car on the way to his first session, my son screamed the whole time. But afterward he said it wasn't so bad and agreed to continue going.

Months went by, and then I received another call from the police. They told me that my son and his friends had gone joy riding in a "friend of a friend's" car. When my son came home, I asked him about the incident; he gave me an evasive song and dance.

Again, I decided to take him to the police station, where I could get a better idea of what was going on. After speaking with the police officer, my son turned himself in, though he said he was not the driver of the car. The owner of the car (the father of the "friend of the friend") was apparently pressing charges against all three of the teens.

At this point, I still did not want to believe that my son had anything to do with gangs. It was approaching the weekend before my son's 15th birthday. He was given permission to sleep over at a friend's house, but the next morning I could not reach my son. He finally showed up around 1 p.m., but I knew something was wrong.

By the end of the weekend, I could see he was very nervous. It was Sunday, and I had fixed his favorite meal, but he ate nothing. There had been several calls in and out of the house during the day, but I had not been privy to their content.

My son's friend was on his way over to drop off a T-shirt my son wanted to wear to school the next day. But I became suspicious. Why did the friend make a special trip when he could have given my son the shirt the next morning at school?

A half-hour later, my son's friend arrived and parked his car in front of our neighbor's house. When he knocked, my son went out to the car and opened the trunk. As I watched, I saw the friend give my son what looked like a white T-shirt. When my son came back into the house, I insisted that he give me the T-shirt. My son protested. I pushed harder.

As he handed me the T-shirt, it came unfolded and revealed a gun.

It was his stepfather's handgun, a .38-caliber special Smith & Wesson that my son had apparently taken from the house the previous Friday. My son knew he had to get the gun back into the house before midnight Sunday, when his stepfather came home.

My son said that gang members had started to give him a ``hard time" and that he had taken the gun for protection. I took this as a sign that I needed to take a serious look at what was going on.

For some time, people had been pointing their fingers at my son, and I didn't want to see it despite the evidence. I did not want to believe my son was involved in a gang.

The gun made me see that my son's future was at stake. I made some calls and found out about a program in Lake Worth called Growing Together.

On Oct. 9, 1991, I took my son out of school and placed him in this long-term rehabilitation program, where we began to put the pieces of our life back together.

When my son was able to go back to school, he was afraid to return to Spanish River High School and stayed at Forest Hill High School in West Palm Beach, where kids enrolled in the program go to school. (He eventually felt compelled to leave Florida and finish his senior year in Michigan.)

Such dire steps, however, were worth the effort. My son is now a successful 19-year-old planning a career as a chef. He graduated from high school in 1994, is attending college in Palm Beach County and will receive his associate's degree in December.

If I had not taken the blinders off, though, my son could well have been in prison today - or dead.

WHERE PARENTS CAN TURN

Parents who believe that their son or daughter may be involved with a gang have several options.

One is to call local police. Ask whether there is a division that specializes in juveniles or in gangs. Boca Raton and Boynton Beach police have been especially active in this area.

Another is to call the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office. Sgt. Julie Bell coordinates the anti-gang task force. Her number is 688-3740.

Parents can also contact the Palm Beach County School District's police headquarters. That number is 434-8300.

For those who may not wish to call a law enforcement agency, help may be available from the Center for Information and Crisis, 930-1234. The special number for teenagers is 930-TEEN (8336).

Another non-law-enforcement organization is the Children's Home Society. The agency's SOS program offers counseling to children and parents. Children's Home Society offices are in Boynton Beach (731-2226) and Belle Glade (996-8710).

Anita Bowman is a resident of Palm Beach County. She wrote this article for The Palm Beach Post.

- Memo: Info box at end of text.
- *Index terms: CHILD PARENT GANG CRIME*
- *Record: PBP11050729*
- *Copyright: Copyright 1995 Palm Beach Newspapers, Inc.*