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### National News

Home from war, vets keep peace in Chicago streets

By La Risa Lynch -Contributing Writer-

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CHICAGO - Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans are returning home from one combat zone to fight a different battle. This time, they are manning city streets to fight against youth violence.

This school year alone saw 15 Chicago Public School students killed by gun and gang violence and another 73 injured by gunfire. The videotaped beating death of 16-year-old Fenger High School honor student Derrion Albert illustrated the growing problem of youth violence.

A local veterans' group wanted to do its part to curb the violence. Leave No Veteran Behind, an education advocacy group, has partnered with public schools to provide safe passage to students. Veterans patrol certain street corners to mitigate altercations that might escalate into violence when students are dismissed from school.

“What we try to do is provide an adult presence in that community so children as they walk from school feel comfortable,” said Eli Williamson, 29, co-founder of the group, who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

However, Mr. Williamson said the veterans' presence isn't about creating a police state, but to give youth a sense of security. The group works in tandem with Chicago police and other parent-driven school patrols.

Veterans, some dressed in army fatigues and others in business suits donning baseball caps embossed with military insignia, monitored students as they converged on the intersection of 35th Street and Martin Luther King Drive in the gentrifying Bronzeville community on the city's south side.

The corner is a transportation hub where students from the area's 10 high schools converge to take public transportation home. The large number of students makes it a magnet for trouble. The group has been patrolling the area since the start of the school year and only had to break up one fight.

“Just by having an adult presence on the street, mitigates a lot of the issues where you don't even have to say anything,” Mr. Williamson said, adding that simple conversation can diffuse a lot of situations. “Because there is such a lack of adults, even out in the neighborhood, kids tend to wild out.”

Chicago Public Schools utilizes the veteran's group on specific days when students have early dismissal or break for the holidays. Those days usually have high risk for violence such as fights. But Sean Harden, the school system's deputy to the CEO for community affairs, noted that using the veterans has been a positive experience. The vets' involvement shows the students that the community is engaged and cares about them, he explained.

“We are not just interested in reacting to a fight, but moreso what is going on with you as a student,” Mr.

Harden said.

While the school board works with other parent patrols, Mr. Harden hopes to get more veterans groups involved in providing safe passage for students.

The vets share a lot in common with inner city youths. Serving in a war zone, many soldiers suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, a disorder many youth suffer from silently.

“A lot of kids who've seen somebody shot and killed suffer some of the same mental issues as veterans,” Mr. Williamson said. “As veterans, we understand the horrors of warfare, the negative impact of violence, how that can destroy whole families, destroy whole communities. If there is a reason why we are out here, it is to let the children know that there is another way.”

Being involved in the safe passage program is one way for veterans to continue their service to country off the battlefield. The group provides financial assistance to help veterans pay down their college debt. In return, Leave No Veteran Behind asks veterans to volunteer 100 hours back to the community.

But it was young Derrion's death that served as a call to duty for Roy Brown, 29, who served more than a year in Iraq.

“Being a product of Chicago Public Schools, I feel like I have an insight into what these kids are going through,” Mr. Brown said.

He noted youth act out for a variety of reasons, including poor family structure, poverty, peer pressure, no jobs or no after school programs. But he added, the veteran group's presence does make a difference.

“You'll be surprised how far a hello will go,” said Mr. Brown, also a Leave No Veteran Behind co-founder.

Vietnam veteran Isaiah Thomas, 62, came out after receiving an email seeking volunteers. Mr. Thomas said he knows a few things about rearing children. He raised six boys and none joined gangs.

“If we save the children, we save ourselves. They are our future. That's what it is all about,” said Mr. Thomas, a formerly homeless vet who now lives in Bronzeville.

Braving Chicago's cold weather to provide safe passage for students was personal for Christopher Carlisle, an Air Force veteran. Mr. Carlisle has a 10-year-old daughter who attends school in Bronzeville. But, he noted volunteering for the program is fulfilling.

“By me helping someone else it is helping myself,” said the 48-year-old disabled vet who also lives in Bronzeville.

*(To learn more about Leave No Veteran Behind visit their web site at <http://www.LeaveNoVeteranBehind.org>)*

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ASKIA MUHAMMAD - FINAL CALL  
STAFFERS-

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