City Heights kids march for peace; Middle school students embrace nonviolence

San Diego Union-Tribune - Sunday, July 18, 2004
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A small group of middle school children led hundreds of people through the streets of City Heights yesterday with a simple message: "Stop the violence. Now."

"I want to make City Heights a better place," said Amran Ahmed, a seventh-grader who is in a Circle of Peace program at Monroe Clark Middle School. "Peace is better than violence, and we should love each other."

Some adults who showed up to support the grass-roots event said they wondered why a message so simple just doesn't seem to sink in.

"It is so sad that we as adults have not given our children a peaceful place to live," said Azim Khamisa, who created a nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing violence.

In 2002, the City Heights community experienced more murders, aggravated assaults and total violent crime than any neighborhood in San Diego. That is why the Tariq Khamisa Foundation brought the Circle of Peace program to Monroe Clark.

"There is such a thirst in this community for peace," said Khamisa.

Khamisa created the Tariq Khamisa Foundation after his 20-year-old son, Tariq, was shot and killed by 14-year-old Tony Hicks in 1995. Soon after his son’s death, Khamisa asked Hicks’ grandfather and guardian, Ples Felix, to join him in his mission of "stopping children from killing children."

Over the years, Khamisa and Felix have toured schools around the nation to speak to students about "the power of forgiveness to break the cycle of violence."

Circle of Peace is an after-school youth program of the Tariq Khamisa Foundation.

About 20 Monroe Clark Middle School students in that program created and organized yesterday’s "Walk to Stop Violence" event down to every detail. With a little help from their program manager, they applied for a small grant, designed T-shirts, planned the route and even wrote the news release. "When they first decided to do a walk, I was thinking: That is big," said Alexis Lukas, program manager for Circle of Peace. "It's so great that they know they have the power to do something like this."

Curious passersby slowed to check out the diverse group as they walked down University Avenue waving colorful signs and screaming "We want peace!" and "Save City Heights!"
Some onlookers smiled and stuck arms out of car windows to wave the two-finger peace sign. Many honked their horns.

Despite the blazing sun, the grass-roots energy gave many people goose bumps. The sight and sound of middle schoolers projecting their feelings and taking control of their community also sparked strong emotion.

"The kids are leading the way," said Laila DeSantiago, as she marched down the sidewalk. DeSantiago wiped tears they reached the white peace sign that was painted on her cheek. "We should be behind them."

James King, one of about 15 Monroe Clark teachers who participated in the walk, said the childrens' message is "beautiful."

"I think this is giant," King said.

"We don't want hate in our alley," Villada said. "We want to think about the future."

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Caption: 2 PICS
1. Amy Villada, 10, held Baby as she listened to speakers at Monroe Clark Middle School before the "Walk to Stop the Violence" march Saturday in City Heights. 2. Participants in the "Walk to Stop the Violence" march left Monroe Clark Middle School in City Heights on Saturday morning. 1,2. Dan Trevan / Union-Tribune photos

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