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## Gang Busters

**Kids join gangs to belong -- but once they belong, they find they can't get out. That's when cops, and even teachers, step in**

By **ROB LAMBERTI**, SUN MEDIA

MISSISSAUGA -- The 16-year-old boy struggles on the ground as four cops hold him down.

The youth yells, demands to know why he's being arrested.

Pushing a member of Peel's Strategic and Tactical Enforcement Policing (STEP) anti-gang task force asking for his identification sparked the confrontation on Elia Ave., in sight of a housing complex on Acorn Pl., near Hurontario St. and Hwy. 403 -- a spot high on the list of concern for gang and drug activity.

STEP mixes intelligence cops with street cops to exert pressure on street gangs in Mississauga and Brampton.

The youth was stopped because he was wearing green sneakers and a green bandana, the marks of a Gators gang member.

"Get the f--- off me," he yells.

He's told he's being searched.

"For what? For what? You can't explain to me, so you have to arrest me?" he yells. "Get the stupid f--- off me."

During the struggle, one cop gets a minor cut to the face. After the youth is put in a cruiser, the team wonders why he's so combative.

He had nothing illegal on him. But a check on the police computer moments later shows he's wanted by Peel's robbery detectives.

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High school teacher James Flaherty wants to scare some parents into keeping their kids straight. He made a 23-minute film called Mouse, about a 10-year-old gang member. The film uses students from Peel's Catholic school system where Flaherty is a communications technology teacher at Ascension of Our Lord Secondary School in Malton.

The lead character of Mouse is played by student Edward Croft; the message is to keep kids out of gangs.

Flaherty got onto the project while making a film about bullying when teachers at a Malton Catholic elementary school told him kids were being recruited into gangs.

"First off, I was surprised to hear that," Flaherty says. "You don't think about kids being recruited." He says the film is a cautionary tale to parents that he hopes will become an educational tool for teachers and cops.

"These are children, they are our responsibility," he says. "They see guys making lots of money selling drugs and see them doing God knows what. But it isn't sustainable.

"If you see your child about to put his hand on a hot stove, you have to stop him."

The film explores how older gangsters use the main character, nicknamed Mouse for his small stature, to help commit crimes.

"It's not something that's fantasy," Flaherty says. "It happens. "I see a little of the reality," he adds.

But he's also used Peel's gang unit for help in keeping the film, which is to premiere this September, factual.

Mouse is a bullying victim and is literally chased into the gang, who instantly solve his problems with the little bullies, but at the same time they suck him in and lure him into doing stuff for them.

"At its heart, it's about bullying and in many respects that's what drives kids into gang involvement," he says.

It has become ubiquitous in Canada, crossing all the lines -- race, economic and cultural.

"It's really everywhere," says Flaherty. "It may look different in your neighbourhood as opposed to another neighbourhood, but it's there."

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There is supposedly only one rule about getting out of a gang: You don't.

"The rules of the gang are you don't leave unless you're in a coffin," says Blue, who hides his identity with a blue bandana, dark sunglasses and a blue L.A. Dodgers baseball cap. A blue T-shirt and baggy jeans finishes the outfit.

"It's a general rule in most gangs. Because this (is) more like a family. If you abandon your own family, you don't deserve to live.

"There's really no point in you living, because you're abandoning the one most important thing in your life at that moment, it's your family, and your family is the gang," Blue says. "And that gang takes care of you. No matter what it is, they always have your back for everything."

Blue says the Crips-style attire is not his present -- it's the 21-year-old's past. When he looks at others, the gang bangers, the wannabes and the young kids seduced by musicians and media extolling thug culture, he can't help but wonder: "What have I created?"

From Los Angeles, where he was drafted by cousins into a street gang, he moved to the GTA, where he easily resumed the life here. "I've been doing this since I was like 12 or 13. I do still live with parents... but I did come out of a broken home. I started realizing when I got a little bit older that, what's the point of doing this? It's really useless. There's really nothing here for me."

Through time, he's paid a heavy price with the loss of family members to violence.

He says many get overwhelmed by the lifestyle: Respect, girls, drugs and power. "I was blinded by it for a long time," he says.

What turned him was six cousins dying, one in Iraq, five others on the streets. "I have a lot of deaths in my family and most of them (were) through gang relations," he says. "And then through the years, you get a lot of traitors, a lot of people that stab you in the back. They wear the rag because they get the protection of the rag; when it comes down to it, they don't have your back."

The kids who want to join gangs basically "want to fit in, that's all," Blue says. "It's natural for teenagers to want to fit into everything," he says. And there's people willing to take advantage of them.

"Most of the time, the gang replaces family," Blue says. "It helps your own self-esteem, as well, because they don't always put you down. What they do is help you out to make you sound like you're a big guy, until you get to that point where you're too big. And then you're on your own," he says. "You do your own thing."

Getting out is another story. He knows there are many who want out, but don't know how. The answer, Blue suggests, could be elusive because of its simplicity: "They should stay in school. They should listen to everyone that tells them right from wrong rather than listening to your gang, saying, 'Do this, do that'.

"I'm here to show them the way," Blue says. "Listen, this path is not right; if you want to live for as long as you want, then change. You have the right to change."

Fights between gangs, Blue says, are primarily caused by disrespect. "Basically, one disrespecting the other most of the time. It's not even about drug deals. If you take our customers, that's all, you take our customers. But if you disrespect us, and you're in our areas, then you will get hurt.

"Even just looking at them can cause disrespect," Blue says. "Giving a person just the wrong body (language) could possibly lead to disrespect. Because I know, on my behalf, I used to be that way. If anyone looked at me the wrong way, I would be on their case.

"It would lead to whatever it needs to lead to. Because at that point in life, I didn't care about my life or anybody else's. All I cared about was money, drugs and women. And the gang."

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Peel gang cop Rob Trujillo climbs the stairs leading from the underground garage at a housing complex in Mississauga's west-end.

He's usually keeping watch on Latino gangs in Mississauga and Brampton, including the Latin Queens and Kings, Raza Unida, Junvenile Latinos 13, the 18th St. gang and a small contingent of their rivals, the MS-13.

This night he's looking towards the left side of the canopy covering the stairway to the parking lot where on the left side the building's ceiling is a five-pointed crown, the symbol of the Bloods. On the right side of the ceiling is a three-pointed crown, the symbol of the Crips.

The two gangs should be rivals. They have often been deadly rivals in the past. But at this complex at The Collegeway and Colonial Dr., they appear to co-exist.

Trujillo walked through after he and other officers arrested two teens, bearing all of the red Bloods should be wearing, including bandanas in the right rear pants pocket, in a parking lot across the street.

One had marijuana and the other, an asp -- a collapsible metal baton.

The team believes the teen was armed with the weapon to exact revenge after a friend was stabbed in the complex the night before.

Detectives were able to figure out who the suspect is and are looking for him. But not with help from the complex.

"Yeah, sure, everybody here in this complex knows him, everybody knows who he is," intelligence Det. Paul Neville says. He says the women in the complex have banded together "to make the place liveable," countering the gang presence.

"This is like no other place," adds intelligence unit Acting Sgt. Dirt Niles. "Traditionally, this place was Bloods affiliated."

But a group of Crips moved in a few years ago, and there was trouble. The troubles have since subsided.

"It's bizarre ... they're sharing the same living space," says Niles. "We thought there was rivalry, but it's calm," says Trujillo. The peace, he believes, reinforces the drug trade. "They're living in harmony."

A Bloods member's street name is etched into a concrete pad urging that he be freed, although he's charged with second-degree murder. Across a paved foot path is another concrete pad reserved for Crips graffiti.

A complex resident, dressed head-to-toe in blue, is upset by the arrests of the two red-clad youths. He says people move in and out, they're not responsible for the graffiti indicating gang infestation.

"How can the neighbourhood stop that unless we have your help, right?" the man asks. "People are scared, right?"

Then he begins to laugh: "You guys kill me. Let me ask you one question ... You just saw them arrest somebody and you're saying you don't know how the block is, so what do you think about this area? You saw them do a terrific job in arresting two young (kids). What I'm trying to say" is that the neighbourhood is tired of police harassment and gang intimidation, he says.

The man served 54 days plus dead time last year for a violent robbery in March 2007 on Rutherford Rd. in Vaughan with a 19-year-old co-accused.

One person's harassment is a cop's act of enforcement. It's part of realizing that gangs aren't going away.

"Suppression is the focus and the key," Niles says. "The key is not to let them act out, walk with firearms, and engage in deadly violence," he says. "Let's take that away from them by taking away the opportunity or increasing the opportunity that they will be discovered and found out at street level."

It seems to be working.

Peel had 19 gang-related murders between 2003 and 2007, and 18 are solved.

"People involved in thug culture, gang members or otherwise, they advertise criminality," Niles says. "That's for other people to be aware what they're about, if they're a drug dealer, a hustler.

"Gang tattoos, they'll be black and devoid of colour," he says. Gang messages, whether tattoo or graffiti, are legible and meant to be intimidating. There's no artistic merit.

In Mississauga and Brampton, the street gangs are primarily Bloods and Crips.

"It's important to note with our Bloods and Crips, they're multi-ethnic, multi-racial," Niles said. "This is Canada. One of the biggest myths is that this is exclusively a minority problem or this is exclusively a young black male problem.

"This is not our experience," Niles says.

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Recently, Neville says a young kid wearing blue was stopped at South Common Mall.

"He's a young kid. We talked to him... He says he's new to the area from Trethewey Dr., Black Creek is where his boys are," Neville says.

The veteran cop had to warn the kid that he was venturing in Bloods territory and to be careful.

"We're looking at safety, it's the kid's safety," he says.