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Standing up against neighbourhood violence

Public school students from Jane and Finch hold peace demonstration

By Concita Minutola

Enough with violence and guns at Jane and Finch. It's not an ad, or political propaganda, but a message send out from the streets by the youth and children who live in that reality.

Sixty students from public schools in the Jane and Finch area demonstrated to the city last Saturday that living together in harmony and without fear is possible.

These "Freedom Fighters," as they call themselves, were able to draw about 1,000 people to their Peace Fair, held in the parking lot of the Jane-Finch Plaza.

"There were no riots, no violence – it was just an afternoon of peace and enjoyment," said a satisfied Phil Edwards, who works daily with troubled youth through the City of Toronto's Youth Outreach program, and with the Recognize the Real organization.

Keisha, a grade 7 student, recited a poem about the high numbers of children who are victims of gun violence in the area.

Other students sent messages using hip-hop music, rap, and reggae, while others danced and drew rainbows and graffiti. Many stopped to look at artist William Ashley's canvas that showed a community of faces filled with fear.

But on this day, the students forgot their fears and were determined to speak their minds and to enjoy themselves. "The kids spoke of their experiences, about who they are and what they do, but mostly they had fun with the many free activities," said Edwards.

The idea for the Peace Fair came after eight months of meetings with students and with the help of teachers, as part of the Model Schools for Inner Cities program – a three-year program started in 2006 to convert schools into support centres for troubled families and students — about 25,000 throughout the city

"This program was created to provide support to the poorest families" explained Vickey Branco, coordinator of the Inner City Model Schools Project of the TDSB.

"We provide English reading and writing classes, because many are children of immigrants who came here to start a new life. We also help guide them in other areas as well. For example, there are meetings with medical experts, teachers, and social workers."

Branco, of Calabrian origin, remembers when her mother first came to Canada not knowing English. "She didn't have this sort of opportunity, and now that I am a principal, I know how important is it to open up schools to mothers and fathers."

The model schools are also a safe haven where students can socialize, because, as Branco said, "especially at night, Jane and Finch isn't a safe neighbourhood for kids. They're afraid so they don't go out."

"The students," explains Edwards, "know that there are adults available to help them, so they feel safer."

Firgrove Public School is a reference point for the 22 public schools in the Jane-Finch area. It was here that two or three students from each school met and

created the group of 60 "Champions of Peace."

"The schools in the area are no longer isolated," concludes Branco, "but parents, children, and everyone is becoming part of a single family, that of Jane and Finch, thanks to such initiatives as the Peace Fair. And if just [a few] summers ago it was known as the 'summer of the gun,' let's hope that now they talk of the 'summer of peace,' and the victory over violence."

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