

# THE CANADIAN PRESS



## Teens face violence and death as they look to gangs for acceptance: filmmaker

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VANCOUVER — As a horrified class of teens looks on, a former Indo-Canadian gang member pulls up his shirt and runs his fingers across an ugly, jagged scar running from his belly button to his shoulder.

"I got ripped open with a machete," says the man identified only as Jagdeep in the documentary *Warrior Boyz*.

"I tried to kill him. He tried to kill me."

The scene is part of director Baljit Sangra's film which premiered at Vancouver's DOXA Documentary Film Festival Saturday. It was also to screen Sunday.

Sangra says the issue of Indo-Canadian and South Asian youth gangs is an ongoing concern in Metro Vancouver.

She says as families struggle to integrate with Canadian society, youths may lose sight of their familial or cultural identities.

And, when they don't find that at home or their subculture, they're vulnerable to the allure of gangs which offer acceptance, the thrill of life on the edge and cash.

It's a world where memory and tradition fade, replaced with suburban strip malls and fast food joints.

It's a world where a quick cellphone call can summon 50 kids armed with knives, bats, bear mace and machetes.

It's world in which some kids struggle to reach their 25th birthday.

And that, says Sangra, is too high a price.

"Everyone knows someone that's been touched by the violence - friend, family, someone in your neighbourhood," she says.

"It bothered me. We're all impacted."

So, armed with a film degree from the University of B.C., she decided to tell the story.

"I just find it so tragic when I see young guys, especially in their teenage years, losing their lives over this kind of stuff, gang violence, youth violence."

And Vancouver Police Department gang squad member Doug Spencer agrees.

He and partners Adam Daliwahl and Elvis Bellia have given their *The Truth About Gangs* presentation hundreds of times in Metro Vancouver schools for the last eight years.

They don't pull any punches in the presentations, which are given to students from the elementary to university levels.

"We show some pictures of kids who have been killed," Spencer says in an interview.

"We want to show them the whole entire truth, not the watered-down version."

Sangra used the presentations as part of the film in which she interviewed Princess Margaret

high school principal Sukh Rai.

Spencer says the message Rai brought to one presentation "made my hair stand on end."

The police were discussing dead gang member Michael Brar when Rai told the class Brar had been one of his best friends before they chose different paths in life.

"It was so black and white," Spencer says.

"Sukh made the right choice. Michael made the wrong one."

The gang squad member says it's stories such as Rai's which make him further committed to removing the sheen "of glitz and glamour" some kids have about gang membership.

And he's glad to have Sangra on board to help deliver that message through Warrior Boyz.

"People are scared to talk about it," he says.

"Kids see violence every day in the media and in the games they play. It's ultra-violence."

"They see and hear their schoolmates getting killed and stabbed and shot," Spencer says.

One such youth in the film is 15-year-old Tanvir.

He's been from school to school and involved in gangs, a situation that has alienated him from his family.

Concerned, Sangra has stayed in touch with Tanvir.

"He has potential, you know," she sighs.

"He just needs to be pushed."

"Kids are so vulnerable. They really need somebody that believes in them and stands behind them."

"They just want to fit in and belong. A couple of bad choices and it's hard to go back from that."

"It's so easy for kids to just get taken advantage of and used."

She says she learned kids today face challenges previous generations did not.

She hopes the film will spur people to begin discussing the issue with a view to changing the circumstances in which youth at risk find themselves.

"There's a lot more work that needs to be done. At least it's a start."

DOXA executive director Kristine Anderson says Warrior Boyz fit the festival's agenda of presenting local films on local subjects with local people perfectly.

"This is such a huge subject right now that this is an obvious fit," she says.

Warrior Boyz is expected to be on television this fall, Anderson says.