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FEATURED

## Counseling center hosts gang seminar

By Sherri Ellington

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Counselor and forensic gang expert Lisa Taylor-Austin talks to a group of educators, counselors and law enforcement officials during a gang awareness seminar at the Ernest Battle Professional Development Center. (Staff Photo: Sherri Ellington)

Law enforcement officials, juvenile justice workers, mental health counselors and school staff members got together recently to learn how to work together to help stop gang activity.

The one-day gang awareness seminar, Gangs 101, was sponsored Oct. 27 by the Butts County Counseling Center and the iClub Clubhouse, a facility for youth and families coping with the challenges of mental health disorders. Both the counseling center and iClub are programs of the McIntosh Trail Community Service Board.

The Gangs 101 seminar featured national forensic gang expert Lisa Taylor-Austin and Terrance Stone of Young Visionaries Youth Leadership Academy.

“We decided it would be good to have a community conversation about gangs,” said Debbie Quinton, director of the Butts County Counseling Center.

Stone is an ex-gang member turned youth counselor who works with state and national intervention and prevention programs for gang members, homeless children and runaways. He is a gang intervention specialist licensed by California. His part of the program was called, “Why do we Bang? What’s in the Heart of a Gang Member?”

“We work with kids all over the U.S.,” Stone said. “We work to get them back on track through employment training and mentoring.”

His session included myths about gangs, related signs and tattoos and his own theory on gang relationships, memberships and exits. The Stone Theory addresses the steps a young person goes through in developing a relationship with a gang: fascination, infatuation, dedication, separation and the exit strategy.

The Gangs 101 program held at the Ernest Battle Professional Development Center aimed to help show various partners ways to work together to prevent, intervene and suppress gang activity in people ages 12 to 17.

In addition to representatives from the Butts County School System and the counseling center, attending were representatives of the Jackson Police Department, Butts County Sheriff’s Office, local fire departments, the Towaliga Judicial Circuit District Attorney’s office, Henry County Juvenile Court and the NAACP.

The morning session was led by Taylor-Austin, who has worked for decades counseling gang members and their families — who sometimes are gang members themselves. She focused on counseling gang members, which she has done for 28 years.

“I worked with kids nobody else wanted to work with,” Taylor-Austin said. “There was no training. I had to figure it out.”

In addition to going through therapies that worked for her clients, she gave tips on how to tell the difference between actual gangs and those who are just pretending.

“You have some innocent kids who really are not gang-involved,” Taylor-Austin said. “Then you have real gang members who, if we had never seen their pictures (on the internet), we wouldn’t have had the conversation” about counseling.

Along with offering tips on risk assessments, she advocated building a social services and law enforcement framework to share information and refer clients to rehabilitation services. These services include employment training and remedial or enriched education.

In addition to drug use and violence, some of the issues involved in gang activity include depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide, she said. Taylor-Austin compared gang involvement to being in an abusive relationship.

Some of the reasons people join gangs include economic disenfranchisement, family dysfunction, environments that encourage social deviance and sociopathy, she said. These issues can be identified and treated early to help reduce gang involvement.

“If we can change a person we can change their behavior,” she said. “You want to dispute their irrational beliefs. Mental health is tricky. It happens kind of in secret, behind closed doors.”

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