

New tool in war against gangs is PEACE

SEAN PEARCE

scm@insidetoronto.com

Toronto's war on gangs will be waged in the hearts and minds of its youth, the city's police chief says.

Chief Bill Blair was at the East Scarborough Boys and Girls Club Monday afternoon to help unveil the newest tools in the Toronto Police Service's efforts to defeat gang violence. The visit was a media event as part of the public education and crime eradication (PEACE) project and heralded the launch of a series of new anti-gang pamphlets and DVDs to help youth avoid getting involved with violence.

The PEACE project began in 2005 and is a partnership between the Ontario government, the Toronto police and young people from across the GTA. Blair spoke to the audience of local youth and concerned community members and emphasized that youth involvement in the project was of highest importance.

"Young people are so important to helping us reach out to other young people," Blair said.

"We have to lock up the people that are causing violence, but there's another generation of young people who understand that they have other opportunities and communities that care about them and want them to be successful. With youth leadership we can show them a better way."

Minister of Children and Youth Services Mary Anne Chambers (the MPP for Scarborough East) spoke at the event as well. She thanked Chief Blair for his efforts as part of the project and stressed that the future of Toronto depends on the success of youth programs such as PEACE.

"The young people in our communities



Mirror photo/JILL KITCHENER

PEACE MESSAGE: Imilio performs spoken word while Toronto police chief Bill Blair watches from the audience during the launch of Project PEACE education campaign at the East Scarborough Boys and Girls Club on Monday. During the launch, two anti-gang DVDs were released, which include an educational video and a public service announcement – the result of a year-long effort, involving police, youth and video students and professionals.

will determine the future of the community," Chambers said. "We all share in the responsibility to help our youth make the right choices."

Toronto Argonauts linebacker Chuck Winters spoke candidly to the crowd about his experiences growing up in Detroit and how he tragically lost his younger brother to gang violence. Winters left the audience with an important piece of advice that his mother had given to him.

"The choices you make today will mold you for the future," he said emotionally.

Michelle Joseph, volunteer co-ordinator for the East Scarborough Boys and Girls Club, said she was delighted to see

the event take place at the club.

"Any sort of event that brings the police and the youth together, in whatever forum, is a definite step in the right direction," Joseph said. "We want to show that we are willing to build partnerships with the police and with other youth groups as well."

Many of the young people at Monday's event said they were touched by the genuine interest shown by the government, police and community in their futures.

Twenty-two-year-old Dhanraj Meraram, who is currently a student in a Youth Employment Learning and Leadership program, was in the audience and said he was pleased to see the

amount of effort involved in the project.

"It's a good feeling," Meraram said. "Everyone that came here today is helping the youth understand what's out there and how they can make the right choices and it helps out and shows people actually care."

Marsha Marshall, 21, who is in the same program as Meraram, agreed.

"It made me feel good because everybody is participating and trying to come together," she said.

Joel Douglas, 17, is a student at Runnymede Collegiate Institute in Toronto's west end and has been a member of the PEACE project for about a year. He said he has seen the impact of gang activity amongst his friends and classmates, which makes his involvement in the initiative all the more relevant.

"I think (today) was really important," Douglas said. "We, as youth, need to make a lot of choices and that includes myself; I am not excluded."