

Colors of Success anti-gang initiative honored by FBI

Gang suppression » As one program receives accolades, other groups brainstorm how to broaden gang prevention reach

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[The Salt Lake Tribune](#)

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Lorena Rivera wanted to quit high school.

Feeling lost and lonely during her sophomore year at Ogden High, the teenager started hanging out with gang members in an effort to fit in. Her grades plummeted along with her ambition.

"I was one of those kids who had very little aspiration to graduate," Rivera said. "I was going to be another high school drop-out statistic."

Instead, the now 18-year-old ditched her gang ties, improved her grades, graduated last spring and is working as a nanny with hopes to one day become a counselor for at-risk youth.

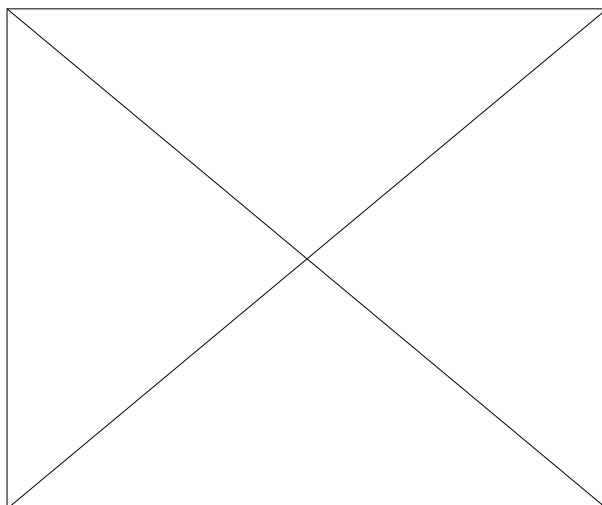
The difference in her turnaround? A program called Colors of Success, which targets troubled youth in schools and pairs them with mentors and programs that steer them away from the gang world while building self-esteem and character, program organizers say.

Created more than 20 years ago, Colors of Success serves 13 schools in the Salt Lake City School District and eight schools in Ogden, said executive director Duane Bordeaux.

With gang activity simmering to new levels across the Salt Lake Valley, there's a renewed sense of urgency for anti-gang initiatives like Colors of Success, said Bordeaux, who accepted a community leadership award from the FBI on Thursday on behalf of the program.

"With a downturn in the economy, violence is on the rise," said Bordeaux, noting the nonprofit Colors of Success will keep its "nose to the grindstone" and continue to sponsor a string

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of school-based prevention and intervention services for youth.

The program's recognition from the FBI this week comes as discussion continues on how to quell gang activity in Utah.

Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. and Salt Lake City Mayor Ralph Becker have separately formed task forces to address gang problems in the state and its largest city, respectively.

Becker's Gang Reduction Forum consists of representatives from the criminal justice system, Legislature, school districts, nonprofit organizations and community groups who are in the process of creating a "framework" to address Salt Lake City's gang problem, perhaps best highlighted over the summer by the death of 7-year-old Maria Del Carmen Menchaca. The girl became the unintended victim of a gang-related shooting outside her Glendale home and ignited a firestorm in the community over how to stop neighborhood violence.

The forum is examining existing gang reduction models used in Salt Lake City and studying other alternatives that could be implemented for gang prevention, intervention and suppression. One committee has recommended bringing the Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program into all Salt Lake City elementary schools for the 2009-10 school year and hiring a gang prevention specialist in the city.

The mayor is reading through proposals from forum participants and will soon hold additional meetings to develop a gang response plan for the city, spokeswoman Helen Langan said Thursday.

Meanwhile, Huntman's task force will meet for the second time on Jan. 22. The group -- led by Salt Lake County District Attorney Lohra Miller -- is composed of members from law enforcement, the court system, treatment providers, schools and community groups, who will try to pinpoint gang activity in every corner of the state and develop a plan to quash it. Part of the statewide task force's mission is to figure out how to bring resources to rural areas that aren't used to dealing with gang issues.

Colors of Success, which is primarily funded through the State Office of Education, works to suppress gangs in several capacities, Bordeaux said. The program assists schools with developing safety plans and helps out with security during the school day. Colors of Success staff also educate school employees about how to intervene with high-risk youth.

Separate programs aimed at keeping girls out of gangs, life skills courses and sports activities are also sponsored by Colors of Success. At the center of every program are counselors who try to be involved in kids' lives, from attending school events to speaking with teachers a student may be having problems with, said Eileen Nicholas, a teacher specialist in student and family services for the Ogden School District.

"It's a matter of building, positive, strong relationships with these kids," said Nicholas.

"Gang life starts when these kids are born, for a lot of them. Some are in a family with more than one generation of gang members," she said.

Third District Juvenile Court Judge Andrew Valdez, who serves on both the governor's and mayor's gang task forces, said he has ordered several juvenile defendants to participate in Colors of Success as part of their probation, which has proven effective. He said he would like more parents to become aware and involved with Colors of Success, which would influence children to choose a healthy path.

Rivera said her life took a turn for the better when she connected with Colors of Success worker Ali Thompson during a difficult sophomore year in high school. She found solace in after school meetings, where homework help and advice on how to deal with problems with family, friends and teachers were available. Soon, Rivera was drawn to Colors of Success activities and quit getting into trouble with gang associates, she said.

"I straightened out and my grades were good," Rivera said. "A lot of kids in high school, they don't have an adult figure they can look up to or trust. If Ali wasn't there, I think I would have been in a juvenile home or something."

She said she's hopeful other teenagers who feel trapped into joining a gang will find Colors of Success for their social outlet.

"If other kids feel like they don't belong, don't go to gangs," Rivera said. "There is a greater program that can help you."

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Colors of Success, a gang prevention initiative offered at 21 schools in Salt Lake City and Ogden, was honored by the FBI this week for strides made in gang prevention.

Statistics show most students who were part of Colors of Success' caseload during the 2007-08 school year improved their grades and stayed out of trouble with the court system.

In Ogden:

--93 percent did not receive a substance abuse violation

--89 percent did not receive a school safety violation

--93 percent did not receive a new juvenile court charge

--59 percent improved their grades

--82 percent attended school regularly

--83 percent reported a "positive change" in family life

In Salt Lake City:

--97 percent did not receive a substance abuse violation

--93 percent did not receive a school safety violation

--67 percent improved their grades

--89 percent attended school regularly

--96 percent reported a "positive change" in family life

Source: Duane Bordeaux, Colors of Success