

Local students combat school violence

By Matthew T. Hall

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Even before waves of brutal school violence crashed on communities in Ohio and Illinois last week, leaving four students dead, youngsters in San Diego were helping to organize events to increase the peace locally.

They said the latest tragedies gave their gatherings a graver significance.

Friday night, hundreds of teenagers and adults held a youth town hall meeting in Lincoln Park titled “Silence is Worse Than Violence.”

A day later, three dozen children from San Diego and their parents flew to Washington, D.C., to join other students from around the country. They plan to recite a “peace pledge” on the floor of Congress on Monday. One of them will hand a copy of the pledge to the Ohio congressman whose district includes the school where a 17-year-old shot and killed three fellow students on Feb. 27.

“I hate how all these high schools just seem unprotected and scary to be in,” said Carlsbad High School senior Natalie Weldon, a trip participant. “High school should be a safe place and a happy place and a peaceful one.”

Monday also is the 11th anniversary of one of San Diego County’s worst cases of school violence — the 2001 Santana High School shootings, which left two people dead and 13 others injured in Santee. It’s also when closing legal arguments will begin in the case of a man accused of shooting two little girls at a Carlsbad elementary school in 2010.

Sherehe Hollins helped organize Friday's forum at the Joe & Vi Jacobs Center, where she works as program manager for civic and cultural engagement. She said calls to action will always follow tragedy.

"It's extremely unfortunate and tragic what's been happening," said Hollins, 31. "At the same time, it's a reminder why we need to have these courageous and oftentimes uncomfortable conversations about what's happening in our communities."

Hollins was an advocate for students at Lincoln High School during the 2007-2008 school year, when she arranged presentations and exhibits on Africa's legacy in Mexico and other subjects to help alleviate tensions between black and Latino students. She said giving youths a voice deters violence.

"While I would love to say, 'Yeah, we can get rid of it entirely,' I think there will always be those moments of tragedy," she added.

Those moments seem to be fewer and further between in recent years.

A February report by the U.S. departments of Education and Justice lists 33 school-related violent deaths in the 2009-2010 school year. That's the lowest figure since such data was first collected in 1992, and it's a continuation of a three-year downward trend.

There were 17 homicides and one suicide of students ages 5-18 in that most recent year. That's fewer homicides than any year since 2001-2002 and fewer suicides since 1996-1997, though numbers have varied widely from year to year.

Michael Brunner, executive director of the Jackie Robinson YMCA in southeastern San Diego, helped promote Friday's youth forum in the Oak Park neighborhood.

"These are young adults bringing this together. That's what I'm really proud of," he said. "There's a lot of people that are working hard on this because the young folks are the solution. The power of youth is amazing."

The forum featured nationally known speaker Kevin Powell — a cast mate from the first season of MTV's "The Real World" who often speaks out against violence — and a panel of local students united in beating back everything from bullying to gang activity.

"Our community needs to stop trying to fight each other," said panelist Bridgette Castillo, 17, a junior at Lincoln High School in Lincoln Park.

Unity also was the unifying theme for the group of San Diego County students now in the nation's capital. Their trip was organized by the Carlsbad-based nonprofit Kids for Peace, which champions community service and environmental stewardship.

In all, 63 students from the organization's chapters nationwide are in Washington, D.C., to rally at the Lincoln Memorial and elsewhere, Kids for Peace cofounder and executive director Jill McManigal said.

The traveling students are mostly elementary school age — and more familiar with bullying than harsher violence — so the topics they and the adults around them tackle will differ from those discussed at Friday's forum.

"We definitely don't ever want to scare our kids," McManigal said. "We want to maintain their innocence. But these kids are savvy and when they have an awareness of something, they want to be part of a positive solution."

In that, the two San Diego efforts are alike.

“Hope is so important because when we hear these dark things happening, it’s easy just to give up,”
McManigal said. “This will serve as an inspiration for people to know that there’s good stuff going on.”

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