

## **An endangered oasis in Irvington: Opinion**

By **Star-Ledger Guest Columnist Saman Dashti**

October 04, 2013



As cities such as Newark and Irvington contend with budget cuts, children are the wrong place to withdraw resources. Irvington police mentors are part of a successful after-school program that is in danger of losing its funding.

Irvington is Newark's little brother in size and stature. The statistics that measure neighborhoods are some of the worst in the nation. But it's in walking down Irvington streets — filled with abandoned lots, empty store fronts and broken homes — that you viscerally feel the community malnutrition.

Like an oasis in a desert, the Irvington Eisenhower Foundation Youth Safe Haven Police Ministration is an after-school and summer enrichment program that provides homework help, art, sports and guidance to more than 50 of the neighborhood's youth. It offers mentoring by police and community members.

In 10 years as a teaching artist in the schools and for community organizations, this was the most complete formula for community "nutrition" and positive change I have seen.

I volunteered last year, offering lessons in liberation arts that direct pain and rage into achievement and leadership. Our hours together were full of powerful singing, percussion instruments, spoken words, warrior dances and survival philosophies — all broken down to achievable individual and group activities.

During the sessions, I observed one 11-year-old girl who had isolated herself. The staff investigated and found she was in danger of failing her classes and had recently become defiant at home. They moved proactively, letting her know they cared and creating a safe place for her to talk. The staff helped her develop tools to solve her challenges. Together they created a contract of accountability that could help guide her through the year and her life. Her grades recovered, and she added some of the most inspiring artwork to the program.

Several brothers in the program struggled with discipline and were emotional during conversations about their behavior. Using expressive activities, we were able to channel their emotions. They became leaders in a circle game, in which everyone took turns creating, then copying, each other's expression. The brothers learned that, with cooperation and patience, they could feed each other's appetite for acknowledgement. Gang life is having less appeal and will eventually lose its power to recruit them at all.

Community is a basic human need. Gangs feed because they provide a form of community. In Irvington, many kids will be asked to join one. The Youth Safe Haven shows young people a better option for emotional nutrition.

Unfortunately, the program may lose funding by the end of the year. It just feels like the wrong time.

The program's momentum is building. We ended our session with a play on the Afro-American experience. For the summer, we brought children to work at a local community garden. We ran a literacy program from a community thrift store. More community members are volunteering. This program has all the right ingredients for community change, and it may all have to end just as it is entering a sustainable community transformation phase.

Without funding, staff, lunches and programs disappear. The Safe Haven brings hope to children in hopeless neighborhoods. At the Safe Haven, laughter is a familiar sound. But on many streets in Irvington's East Ward, it's tough to tell where the laughter is.

Scientific evaluation of programs such as the Safe Haven documents that participants have dramatically less involvement in the juvenile justice system, gangs and teenage pregnancy. Academic achievement is higher; dropout rates lower.

As the federal government and cities such as Newark and Irvington contend with budget cuts, the wrong place to withdraw resources is initiatives that invest in our children. It costs \$152,000 a day to fund juvenile detention across New Jersey, according to the Justice Policy Institute. It costs less than \$200,000 a year to run a Safe Haven with the help of in-kind services, such as providing space for the program.

Although they can't do it alone, this is what Irvington chose. Which is the better investment?

*Saman Dashti lives in Irvington.*