

Allure of the streets

Lack of jobs, recreation, education spurs gang growth

Second of three parts By Brian Lazenby Staff Writer

Michael Simmons destroyed lives.

"I destroyed communities, neighborhoods. I took food out of children's mouths," he said.

In doing so, he made up to \$10,000 a day selling cocaine and running a gang of thugs on Camden Street in East Chattanooga.

It all began when he was 13.

Mr. Simmons, now 48, decided he didn't like authority, didn't like being told what to do. He was barely a teenager when he quit school and left home. He committed burglaries and armed robberies and was ultimately a major distributor and user of cocaine.

"I lived a very dangerous life for many years," he said.

It was early morning in April 1995, after 18 years in prison, that he said he turned his life over to Christ and became someone else.

"I went from being 'Big Mike' to being Mr. Simmons," he said.

Since that day he has dedicated his life to ministering to people like himself, people whose lifestyle is leading them to prison or the grave, he said.

"If I hadn't gone to prison and stayed as long as I did, I'd be dead today, or I'd be in a federal prison for the rest of my life," he said.

Dr. Lisa Taylor-Austin, a Connecticut-based psychotherapist specializing in gangs and gang-related behavior, said there never is a single driving factor for why young people join gangs.

"Each kid has a different reason for joining a gang," Dr. Taylor-Austin said. "We often look at what's pulling kids toward gangs rather than what is pushing them into a gang."

Dr. Taylor-Austin said creating activities for young people to get them off the street is a vital part of keeping them out of gangs.

"If we don't have activities for teenagers, they are literally hanging out on the street," she said.

Greg Rivers, supervisor of the Hamilton County Juvenile Court's intensive probation program, said street gangs are becoming more prevalent in the Chattanooga area.

Darius Sneed, a cousin of a young man fatally shot last month in what police have categorized as a rival gang retaliation, agreed. While testifying in court last week, he said he is involved with a gang but he wants out.

Gangs are "going after people's families," he said. "Now in 2006, it's raw."

On June 13, a juvenile shot and killed 24-year-old Adrian Patton after Michael Daniels, 20, a ranking member of the Skyline Blood street gang, gave the order, police said. Mr. Daniels is charged with first-degree murder, criminal conspiracy to commit murder and illegal possession of a firearm. The 17-year-old suspected of pulling the trigger is charged in Juvenile Court but likely will face adult charges, police said.

Three days later, police said, Quanan Hutchinson, 20, shot and killed Jermaine Southers, 24, in East Lake Courts in what authorities called revenge for Mr. Patton's death. Mr. Hutchinson is charged with first-degree murder.

On June 22, a 13-year-old boy was wounded in a drive-by shooting in the Eastdale community. A 16-year-old is charged in Juvenile Court with attempted murder.

A DIFFERENT TIME Mr. Rivers said a task force several years ago was effective at rooting out gang activity, but it eventually was disbanded. He thinks it should be reassembled.

"Now every neighborhood has a separate gang problem," he said. "The kids are getting younger, more dangerous, and guns are so easy to get now."

Chattanooga Municipal Court security officer Hugh Reece was a member of the task force, which included law officers, federal prosecutors, jail officials, probation officials and representatives from several area municipalities. He said the group met regularly to share information about gangs and was "extremely effective" at abating gang problems.

The police officers involved in the task force were "some of the best street officers on the force," said Mr. Reece, who is also vice president of the Southeast Council of the Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth. He was disappointed to see the program halted.

Mr. Reece said he has seen gang activity in Chattanooga come and go in cycles, but he suspects the recent rash of gang-related violence is different.

"This is going to be here for a while," he said. "Tensions (on the street) are high. It's going to be a long, hot summer."

A GUIDING HAND Mr. Simmons said church leaders need to be more involved. He said he used to sell large amounts of cocaine just 100 yards from a church, yet he was never approached by a minister.

"(Troubled youth) need people to be consistent in their lives," Mr. Simmons said.

He credits a persistent minister who wasn't afraid of the guns and drugs with helping him turn his life around. He believes a lack of supervision, discipline and positive role models is fueling gang enrollment.

"I've walked in their shoes, out of their shoes and around their shoes," Mr. Simmons said. "I know where they are headed — to prison or the cemetery."

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Staff Photo by D. Patrick Harding Minister Michael B. Simmons Sr.,48, of Alternative Prison Ministry Inc. stands on Camden Street where he used to sell drugs and commit assaults.

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fearful after
shootings, A6