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Providing Training to Professionals and the Community on Gang Issues

## **"Injunction Highlights Culver City Gangs"**

**by John Sweeney**

*Culver City News, Thursday, June 3, 1999*

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Gangs? In Culver City? Most local public officials and police say that Culver City has no criminal gangs, never had, and never will.

Gang experts disagree, saying that Culver City is rife with as many as seven gangs, and that some gang members attend Culver City High School, while many others are grads.

An upcoming court injunction appears to trash comfortable notions of a gang-free Culver City. On June 3rd, the Los Angeles District Attorney's office is scheduled to move against the Culver City Boyz in Santa Monica Superior court with a civil suit that seeks to curtail the actions of gang members in certain Westside areas, including Mar Vista and Venice.

In a curious twist, the Culver City Police Department is not a direct party to the proposed injunction, and will not directly enforce its rules.

In a recent interview with the Culver City News, Randi Joseph, a spokesperson for the police department, said that police will not enforce the injunction because the geographical boundaries of the injunction do not include Culver City. While that is mostly true, there is a small part of Culver City that includes Sunkist Park.

At issue is the question of whether the Culver City Boyz actually have a base in Culver City. City officials argue that the gang is based in Los Angeles, while knowledgeable gang experts say the gang has solid ties within Culver City.

Moreover, experts say that time is nigh to recognize the existence of gangs in the city and to deal with the underlying causes of gang problems.

In a comment that underscores the seriousness of the problem, one long-time Culver City teacher remarked upon reading the names in the injunction, "I know all these guys, it's like reading the high school yearbook."

Culver City Police Lt. Ted Baughn said that the Culver City Boyz are not from Culver City.

"What's really sad," Baughn said, "is that you have a gang based in Los Angeles that uses Culver City as its name, and that gives Culver City a bad name."

Baughn listed a number of facts that he said leads to confusion about Culver City limits, such as that Mar Vista Gardens uses a Culver City mailing address, though it is located in Los Angeles, the LAPD Pacific Division uses a Culver City mailing address, as does the Department of Motor Vehicles.

On the other hand, gang expert Lisa Taylor-Austin, who spent a year as a counselor at Culver City High School in 1990, said that Culver City is home to several gangs, including the Culver City Boyz, and gangs on Helms Ave. as well as members of the Bloods and female gangs. Taylor-Austin most recently visited Culver City in January, when she photographed gang graffiti around Culver City.

Taylor-Austin is a full-time gang consultant.

"The local politicians took the position that 'there are no gangs in Culver City.' I knew differently," Taylor-Austin said in an email interview from her office in New York. Taylor-Austin lived in Culver City at the time that she worked at the high school.

Some 75 alleged gang members have been named in the injunction, including, said Taylor-Austin, six to nine students at Culver City High. She added that members of the LAPD's CLEAR, or anti-gang unit have visited the school. She named the students but the Culver City News does not print the names of juveniles involved in crimes.

According to Taylor-Austin, among the recent Culver City graduates included in the injunction are Daniel Banuelos, Carlos Becerra, John Haro, Jessie Cervantes and Jesus Rincon.

It is unclear at this point whether the gang members will have legal representation on June 3. At time of writing, few motions had been filed with the court.

The debate over whether Culver City is home to gangs has continued for years, and stems in part from concerns over property values. If a community is perceived to have gang problems, property values within the community tend to decline, or so goes the common belief.

As a researcher for The Outlook newspaper, this reporter once studied at length the problem of the geography of Culver City, Mar Vista, Palms, Venice, Marina del Rey, Los Angeles, and the emerging community of Del Rey.

Research results indicated that few communities wished to associate with the name of Mar Vista, which is the namesake of Mar Vista Gardens, a public housing project that has been one center of gang activity in recent years.

Mar Vista Gardens is neither in Culver City nor in Mar Vista, but lies within an adjacent area of Los Angeles. Thus the widespread confusion.

No public official took a stand on defining the borders of the various communities, despite calls to Los Angeles City officials, Councilwoman Ruth Galanter's office, officials at Mar Vista Gardens, and even librarians in Mar Vista. The subject was so politically charged that no one would touch the subject.

Since city officials refuse to clearly define local borders, confusion may linger for years.

Most noticeable was the creation of the community of "Del Rey," apparently out of thin air. Residents of this community, supposedly located east of Lincoln Blvd. in an area formerly known as Mar Vista, took this moniker after "Marina del Rey," another artificial community created out of marshland in the 1960's.

While Culver City insists it has no gang problems, the Culver City Police Department plans to monitor border areas associated with the Culver City Boyz. In particular, police will closely watch a "safety zone" at Sunkist Park, bordered by Jefferson and Venice Blvds., and Centinela and Sepulveda Blvds. The Mar Vista Gardens housing project stands roughly to the south of the center of that area.

If Culver City Police notice any spillover gang activity in that area, said spokesperson Joseph, they will notify the LAPD. The LAPD's Pacific Division is located at Culver Blvd. and Centinela Ave., within the boundaries of that area.

According to graduate student at the University of Southern California Alex Alonso, Culver City is dominated by hispanic gangs, such as the "Culver City 13 Gang", another name for the Culver City Boyz, and the up and coming Helms Avenue Gang, according to information from his website, <http://www.streetgangs.com>." Alonso said that while the high school that Culver City Boyz attend is in Culver City, their turf extends mostly over Los Angeles city limits.

Alonso added that there are some black gangs active in Culver City, with Crip activity on the east portion of Culver City near La Cienega Blvd. where the Geer Gang Crips are located and on the north side of Culver City near Washington Blvd. where the PlayBoy Gangster Crips dominate. Just west of Culver City is Venice, particularly the Oakwood neighborhood, where the Venice Shore Line Crips hold forth. Oakwood is bounded by Lincoln Blvd., California Ave., Abbot Kinney Blvd., and Rose Ave. The Culver City 13 and the Venice Shore Lines have been involved in a violent rivalry since 1990, Alonso said.

The Los Angeles District Attorney's Office has used injunctions against various gangs since the late 1980's, including the Mara Salvatrucha Gang in Hollywood, the Harpys gang in southwest Los Angeles, and against the Shatto Park Locos and the Columbia Little Cycos, two cliques of the 18th St. gang near downtown Los Angeles. Those cliques reportedly dominate Shatto Place and the MacArthur Park areas of the Wilshire District.

In 1997, the District Attorney's Office sought an injunction against 17 suspected members of the 18th St. gang that dominated a 17-square block area near eastern Culver City. The 17-square-block area is bounded by Westhaven Street, Hauser and Jefferson Boulevards and Alsace Avenue.

Gang experts question whether injunctions are an effective tool against gangs. Taylor-Austin said that recent injunctions against LA gangs have simply moved the problem around the city. She said that some members of the 18th Street Gang have moved into Culver City as a result of an injunction brought in recent years.

"There is no solid evidence that gang injunctions resolve any issues associated with gangs," she said. "Gang injunctions only serve to move the problem elsewhere, to another neighborhood. We see that with the 18th Street gang injunction. To address the real gang problem facing our community we need to address the root of the issue, not the symptoms."

Taylor-Austin suggested that the best course of action is for Culver City to confront gang problems directly.

"Systematic denial of a serious problem only fuels the problem itself," she said. "When a community does not have the opportunity to be fully privy to what happens on its streets and in its neighborhoods, no healthy steps can be taken toward resolving the problem."

Finally, most troubling about the existence of gangs in Culver City are their ties to California's most notorious prison gang, "La Eme, which stands for, 'La Muerte,' or 'Death.'" Taylor-Austin said that Culver City gangs have ties to "La Eme."

Local community groups have been called into action to help confront gangs on the Westside. CLEAR (Community Law Enforcement and Recovery) is the most prominent among them, and is active in Venice, Mar Vista and Culver City.

Community members may involve themselves in efforts to eradicate gangs by reporting the following activities: To report gang activity, call (310) 785-3299. To report graffiti, call (800) 611-2489. To find a gang prevention speaker for local events, call (310) 202-4506. Councilwoman Galanter's office may be reached at (310) 524-1150.



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