

Conference on gangs

Experts explain the lure of youth gangs

By EMILIO ALVARADO
STAFF WRITER

More than 100 people from as far away as San Diego attended a conference on gang culture in Watsonville Saturday with the hopes of curbing violence that has mushroomed in California over the years.

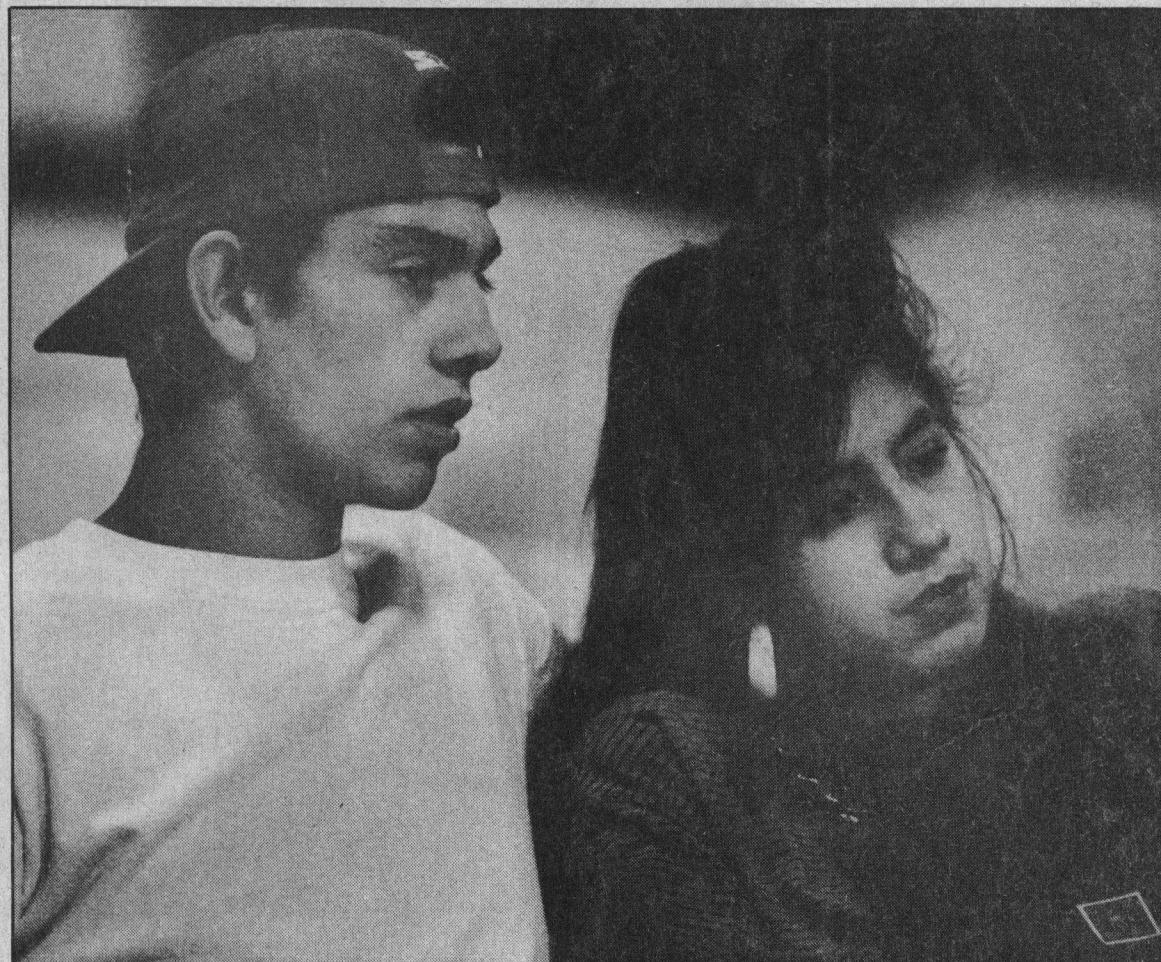
The participants, most of whom were teenagers from Watsonville and other communities in the Central Coast, attended workshops on various aspects of gang culture at E.A. Hall Middle School. The workshops, which were conducted by experts in their field, called attention to gang behavior, drug and alcohol abuse, and a connection between domestic violence and gang violence.

Teresa Contreras, of the State Justice Department and head of the state's Domestic Violence Program, said violence in the home often leads to violent behavior in children. Many of these children end up joining gangs and the violent behavior they witnessed in the family is repeated, this time against society, Contreras said.

"They come to believe that violence is ordinary," she said.

If the domestic violence is to blame, at least in part, for creating and perpetuating gang violence, it is a pervasive problem that is not easy to combat, she said. Contreras said in 1989 there were 188,581 cases of domestic violence reported in California. The actual count is probably much higher since many cases are never reported, she said.

One workshop presenter with firsthand knowledge of gangs was Richard "Chocolate" Santana. Santana, 28, of Stockton, joined a gang when he was 16. He told a roomful of teenagers that joining a gang may seem like an attractive thing. For many, gangs provide companionship and protection, but soon



Mike McCollum

Jose Villalobos and Jackie Arellano, of Watsonville, listen to a speaker during the Saturday conference.

they find it is almost impossible to leave as pressure to remain loyal to the gang mounts. Members who attempt to leave often meet with violence from their fellow gang members.

Once a gang member has a taste of violence, Santana said, it is difficult to stop the behavior.

"You get hooked; you start to like it," he said. But he warned, "Violence goes hand in hand with death."

Santana, who was able to leave his gang in his early 20s, has since graduated from Fres-

no State University. He considers himself lucky, and admitted the conference wouldn't help many teenagers who are already entrenched in gangs.

"We can't save everybody," he said. "We are trying to reach the 'wanna-be's.'"

The daylong conference was sponsored by the California Coalition to End Barrio Warfare and several other organizations from across the state. Daniel Alejandro, a counselor for the Pajaro Valley school district and a member of the coalition, said he hoped the conference provided a realistic education about

gangs.

The image many people have of gangs, he said, is what they see on television or in movie theaters.

"We are trying to undo what movies like 'Colors,' have done," he said. He insisted that the conference was not meant to "glorify" gangs but to "educate" the public about them.

Alejandro hopes the coalition will be able to sponsor a similar conference in Salinas this summer and others are scheduled later this year throughout the state.