

# Practicing Peace In North Richmond, CA

## Troubled Kids Learn Not to Fight

by Venise Wagner, Chronicle Staff Writer

Robert Matlock used to have a short fuse. It took as little as one word to set him off. Then he learned about Tookie. That's Stanley "Tookie" Williams, San Quentin Death Row inmate, co-founder of the Crips gang and Nobel Peace Prize nominee.

Over the past year, Robert, 15, has absorbed the prisoner's story: how he changed from a gangly kid into a muscle-bound gangster; how a thug's life landed him on death row; how his years in prison converted him into a champion for street peace.

Robert also has heeded the advice of Fred Jackson, the white-haired sage in North Richmond's Neighborhood House, where the Internet Street Peace Project got its start a year ago using Williams' cautionary tales of prison and gang violence.

"I used to have a bad temper," said Robert. "At first, my mind was twisted, confused. I had street violence in my head. I had demons inside me. Now I can work with it."

Robert is one of about 70 youths who show up on any given day after school for the Internet Street Peace Project. Here, they learn to incorporate Williams' message of "do the right thing" into their young and often conflicted lives.

The project uses both sets of Williams' books as readers: the 1996 "Tookie Speaks" series, which is directed toward elementary school kids, and "Life In Prison," intended for teenagers and published in 1998.

The program combines peer leadership, literacy building, case management, and conflict resolution training.

The youngsters come from North Richmond, an enclave where family feuds have led to retribution in drive-by shootings and beatings.

Homicides and prison are natural extensions of many of their lives—relatives are often the victims of both.

"Life in Prison" deglamorizes prison life: the matchbook size of cells; the feelings of isolation and loneliness that typically crop up; violence in the yard; the humiliation of strip searches; the bad food; the poor health care; the day-in and day-out routine of living caged up.

"The approach that we've taken is to work toward creating a new culture," said Barbara Becnel, executive director of Neighborhood House and co-author of the books. "Part of acculturation is repetition. They read the book, they discuss minute details of the book, they apply what they're discussing and what they're learning to their own lives and their own community."

Jackson said the success of the program comes from constant reminders to the kids that he loves them as his own, even though they are not his children.

"A lot of it is self-hatred, that black people hate each other," Jackson said of the children's environment. "So they don't value each other's lives. In this program, I teach them to love each other."

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### Controversy over "Tookie" Williams

Some people are upset that Williams is getting so much attention and even recognition (a film has been made about him and he has received several Nobel Peace Prize nominations) for his anti-gang work. Not only is he convicted of killing four people, he is responsible for creating one of the worst street gangs in history. What do you think, can people who have done bad things redeem themselves?