



Discussion of street gangs opens eyes to harsh reality

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PEORIA — Jason Haynes painted a bleak picture Tuesday night at a University of Illinois Springfield alumni event at the UIS Peoria Center.

The lieutenant at the Federal Correctional Institution in Pekin talked about the prevalence of gangs inside the prison.

"Some of these guys look at going to prison as a rite of passage," said Haynes, who said gang membership is practically mandatory. "Some gangs call prison, college. They refer to their release date from 'college' as a graduation day."

"But it is what it is," said Tim Gleason, whose UIS criminal justice students attended the presentation that also included Detective Elizabeth Blair of the Peoria Police Department and Deputy Ronda Guyton of the Peoria County Sheriff's Department.

"This is real world stuff," Gleason said. "I guess I walked away like (attorney Michael Risinger) did - depressed."

Risinger, a candidate for judge of the 10th Judicial Circuit, also was in attendance.

"I didn't realize it was that bad in prison," said Risinger, who won the Republican primary last month. "That's what I'll say. I didn't realize it was *that* bad."

Blair's area of expertise in the "Circle of Violence" discussion was street gangs. She said there are about 20 affiliations in Peoria, including the Chicago-based Gangster Disciples and Vice Lords.

"If someone is wanting to get out of the gang lifestyle, in my opinion, you're going to need to move," said Blair, a UIS graduate like Haynes and Guyton.

"If you're involved in an area in the city, how can you (stick around)? It's kind of like putting an alcoholic in a bar. Are they really going to cure their alcoholism?"

Street gangs use graffiti to mark their turf.

What goes up must come down, according to Haynes.

"It takes the community to be involved," she said. "When you see the graffiti showing up in your neighborhood stores, in the alleys - wherever it may be - the most important thing is to get rid of it."

Haynes, who lives in Pekin, said he saw the writing on a garage wall last week when he left home to use an ATM near the bike trail.

"Very much surprised," said Haynes, not only by the initial Gangster Disciples graffiti, but even more by the Bloods name spray-painted over it. In some neighborhoods, that would be evidence of a gangland turf war.

"I could see where the Gangster Disciples would just be some wannabes," Haynes said. "But the specifics of the Bloods graffiti is what really stood out because it was obviously someone with a little bit more in-depth knowledge of the gang."

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The solution to the problem is to remove one of the links that make the revolving door prison system work as smoothly as it does.

These gangs have it all worked out - the justice system is just a game to them. Prison time is so predictable, they can set their watch by the sentences handed out.

It's because the system is too lenient and too lazy to prosecute the minor offenders that grow up to be felons. The state should quit playing 'Let's Make A Deal' and put them away for the entire term of the sentence - and forget about the day-for-day option. That's just rewarding them for keeping their nose clean - something they should have done all along.

A gang banger doesn't worry about going to prison. A 10-year sentence will be cut to 5 in a plea agreement. The 2 years he's waited to go to trial will be knocked off the 5. With a day-for-day option, he may serve a total of 18 months out of his 10 year term.