

# Rally calls upon community to end gun violence

By **SUE MASARACCHIA-ROBERTS**  
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Kajuan Hodge, of North Chicago, lost his mother, his brother, his sister and two cousins to gang violence and random gunfire. Shawntrell Hayes was gunned down in broad daylight at a Burger King in Waukegan. Nardo Usher was murdered during a home invasion while protecting his girlfriend and her children.

Much like how 15-year-old Haydia Pendelton of Chicago was gunned down Jan. 29 after participating in the president's inauguration, these and many others have died needlessly due to guns, gangs and misdirected fire. Many are from Lake County neighborhoods.

To raise awareness, Family First Center of Lake County in conjunction with its subsidiary CeaseFire program led a Rally for Peace event at North Chicago High School, Feb. 9, the same day Pendelton was buried.

The rally, emceed by Deric Caples, was as much about bringing an awareness of the impact of gang violence as it was a faith-based tribute to those whose lives had been taken and a portrait of the impact on those left behind. The rally

also served as a testament to the pervasive hope that this senseless violence can be stopped.

"To raise awareness of these victims of violent crimes and gang actions, [we want] to spearhead people to be responsible for themselves and their neighborhoods and to prevent further violence," said Evelyn Chenier, executive director of Family First Center of Lake County. "We need a time-out for young people being senselessly killed."

Caples addressed the crowd of several hundred at the rally saying, "We are speaking out every way we know. We will either go up together or we go down together. Instead of people dying every day through armed violence, there is a better way to solve problems."

During the event, members from CeaseFire discussed the problems of gang warfare on stage in front of an empty casket.

Politicians attending promised to help alleviate gun violence and ensure funding for CeaseFire's work while prayers, music, drama and rap were presented by local groups, including the North Chicago High School Band, Choir and Pom Pom teams. They all shared

the common theme of unnecessary loss and pain. Most poignant were the testimonials from the families who had lost a member like Brianna Hayes, who sang a soulful song about the loss of her brother Shawntrell and bemoaned the loss of a protective community.

"When we grew up," said Hayes, "the neighbors got us if we did something wrong and then our parents got us when they got home. We need to stop telling our neighbors and others not to chastise our kids. It takes a village to raise our community."

She also observed, "We all line up for Jordan [athletic shoes], but why don't we line up to stop the violence? CeaseFire can make that easier to do."

CeaseFire is an antiviolence program and initiative of the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention housed by the Family First Center of Lake County. Its goal is to reduce street violence by using outreach workers – themselves often former gang members and felons



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**Members of CeaseFire talk about the problems of gang warfare Feb. 9 in front of an empty casket.**

– to interrupt potentially violent situations.

These "interrupters" work on the streets to mediate gang conflicts and prevent retaliatory shootings. Having been part of the gang culture, CeaseFire members understand why kids join, why they stay in and how they can escape the influence of gangs.

CeaseFire member Andre Warship called gang life a contradictive lifestyle.

"Gangs will shoot you for your shoes," he said, "but they won't tell on you if you shoot [someone]."

He said his life changed after his time in prison.

"I knew about the goings on taking place on the streets and how to prevent it," Warship said.

That's what he's working on for now.

"I did this for my mom, my grandma and my family," he said.

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