

The Seattle Times

Thursday, July 24, 2008

Don't need cape to be a crusader

By Jerry Large

Seattle Times staff columnist

Men in tight outfits abound in movies this summer.

Have crime? Call a superhero.

But outside the theater, fighting crime requires people with their feet on the ground working together.

Sixteen-year-old Luisa Ashenfelter is one of those people. She doesn't wear a cape, but she does have long nails painted yellow.

Luisa was in Washington, D.C., last week trying to persuade lawmakers to support the Youth PROMISE Act, which seeks to reduce youth violence by creating a web of support for young people.

Luisa, who'll be a junior at Franklin High School in the fall, and nine other Seattle students arrived at the Capitol the same day a 17-year-old from their neighborhood was shot and killed outside a fast-food restaurant in Kent.

Police believe the shooting was gang-related and say the 18-year-old suspect was himself shot hours later in Renton.

In a Seattle Times story in May, police attributed an increase in youth violence around Puget Sound to a growth in gang membership.

And last year, the Justice Department said a study of 18 cities found a "growing number of offenders appear to be younger, and their crimes more violent."

Governments have promised more police, but the ultimate answer is keeping kids out of gangs to begin with.

Paul Patu has been working with Luisa and the other teens for more than five months as part of World Vision's Youth Empowerment Project (YEP).

Patu is the Seattle education and youth-development director for World Vision, which is known for its humanitarian work in poor

countries. But of course we have poverty and justice issues here, too.

World Vision runs programs in Rainier Valley and Skyway, where the 10 young people in YEP live and where gangs are a particularly acute problem.

The Youth PROMISE Act fits this year's YEP goals.

A young person can be a menace or an asset to society, Patu says. "The only difference is how much their community invests in them."

The act, sponsored by U.S. Rep. Bobby Scott of Virginia, would fund local councils that would bring together police, courts, schools, social services, health providers and other groups that deal with young people. Each council would figure out what kids in its community need and how to give it to them, and would be accountable for seeing that plans are carried out effectively.

The act supports what children's advocates say works: getting families out of poverty, providing high-quality early education, preventing child abuse and neglect, and making health care accessible.

In D.C., the Seattle kids met with Scott, then with Congressman Jim McDermott and Sen. Maria Cantwell.

Luisa said Cantwell promised to support the kids' anti-gang work, and McDermott was "really cool and laid-back, and he let us ask questions."

The kids did such a good job, she said, that later McDermott signed on as a co-sponsor.

That kind of response is empowering, and it's what World Vision's program is about: helping young people see they have the power to make a difference, even without X-ray vision.

Jerry Large's column appears Monday and Thursday. Reach him at 206-464-3346 or jlarge@seattletimes.com.