

BOARD OF EDUCATION – CITY OF NEW YORK
WALTON HIGH SCHOOL

2780 Reservoir Avenue, Bronx, N.Y. 10468

Valerie Vallade
Principal

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August 7, 2000

Dear Mr. Ramos:

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for all of your assistance over the course of this school year. You have made my first year at Walton a pleasure. Coming into a new building, in a new position, as the new kid on the block, is not easy. However, the support that you provided is greatly appreciated.

Kudos to you and the dean's office staff for the excellent work you have done this past year. To move our school off of the top 10 list of the City's most violent schools is an extremely daunting task. You did it and made it look easy. To have reduced student suspensions by 30% over the course of one year is an incredible achievement. Please keep up the great work. You and your staff have done an excellent job and it is greatly appreciated.

Thank you, once again, for all that you have done over the course of the year.

Yours truly,



Valerie Vallade, Principal

VV/kkp

**THE ANDREW DRAPER ACADEMY
PUBLIC SCHOOL 101
THE EAST HARLEM LEADERSHIP ACADEMY**

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Alexander Castillo, Principal Orlando Ramos, Director Helene Llull, AP

April 8, 2005

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

It is a pleasure to write this letter of recommendation for my colleague Orlando Ramos. Orlando was given the enormous responsibility of restructuring JHS 99, a persistently failing school that ranked last in all categories within our district. JHS 99 was a place where the surrounding schools in the district sent their most troubled students and Orlando was the 3rd Director in six years.

JHS 99 has a 93% student poverty level and is located in a struggling, poor community. Upon Orlando's arrival only 2% of the students had passed the state reading exam, approximately 65% of the students had at least one suspension in their files and in addition, there was a 90% staff turnover each year. It was a school known for its violence and low achievement and the Superintendent had made the decision to close JHS 99. In Orlando's first month here he was assaulted by a student and in his second month he was assaulted by a parent. He returned to work the very next day after these incidents and more determined than ever to 'fix' this school.

His first step was to change the name of the school to the East Harlem Leadership Academy and recruit a staff that had the same passion for children that Orlando had and promote this new school in the neighborhood. In merely a little more than two years, the East Harlem Leadership Academy had recorded some of the highest gains in the district on the state reading exam and the suspension rate was reduced by 50%. The new superintendent was quoted as saying that the East Harlem Leadership Academy is demonstrating more progress than another school in the region that has a mid to high-income population with considerably more resources. Orlando

inherited a school where parents requested to transfer their children out, and turned it into a school where parents request information on how to enroll their children in.

Orlando faced what seemed to be insurmountable odds and achieved his goal within a short period of time. He faced a demoralized, fractured and fatigued staff and community and through his tireless energy and strength he resurrected an education community. As you enter the school you will see a mural, which Orlando painted and it reads, 'Accept Responsibility, Make No Excuses!' He demands excellence from his staff and students and he believes in leadership through example. Orlando is a high intensity multitasked educator and is results oriented. I highly recommend Orlando without reservation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alex Castillo", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Alexander Castillo,

Principal and former Superintendent of School District 12, Bronx, New York

UFTer finds solution for school's gang problem

MILLER PHOTOGRAPHY

No incidents since Walton HS initiates 'Peace Fest'

By MICHAEL SPIELMAN

Walton HS has seen more than its share of violence, much of it the result of gang activity. But thanks to an innovative program the Bronx school is suddenly looking like the U.N. General Assembly, only without the rhetoric.

The program is Peace Fest, a weekly gathering of gang leaders that UFTer Orlando Ramos, Walton's security coordinator, painstakingly set up. Once a week the leader and a lieutenant of each gang — they call themselves families or nations — sit down to talk about problems that used to lead to violence. They rap instead of rumble.

And in the last three months there have been no gang-related incidents. None. Zero.

"It's absolutely amazing," said Ramos. "I knew this program would be successful, but never in my wildest dreams did I expect zero incidents."

"They talk about all kinds of things," Ramos said. "We explore hypothetical situations, what would happen if ... and the kids talk through the need for violence and ways to get around it. They always come up with a better solution."

The weekly sessions involve 25 to 30 leaders of some of the city's most notorious gangs meeting with Ramos, Walton Principal Nicola Genco and two school social workers, Nadia Pastrana and Derek Motley.

The adults start the discussion, pointing it in a particular direction for the day, and then the kids take over, Ramos said.

And they talk intelligently and compassionably, he noted. "They sit together

and eat doughnuts and drink juice and talk. These are members of gangs who had never sat together before — who would never have dreamed of sitting down together — and now they talk and they laugh and make friends."

As a result, Ramos said, they no longer "walk in fear" in the school.

"Walton is now a safe place for them," he said.

That's a huge change in the atmosphere at the school, known for gang incidents, stabbings and the like. At one point even the principal was threatened by gangs and had to have two bodyguards, Ramos said.

A key factor in the success of Peace Fest — a name the gang members chose — is scotching rumors before they spread and lead to problems. "Rumor control," Ramos said, "because it used to be that a kid would hear that one of his gang members got beat up and before you know it there would be attempts at retribution — whether anything had actually happened or not."

Ramos has designated a half-dozen teachers who the kids said they trust as information centers. He keeps them constantly informed, and they him, of incidents in the school so that when kids hear a rumor they can quickly find out what the truth is.

Peace Fest and the peace it has brought to Walton is the result of Ramos' extraordinary rapport with the students, especially gang members, and his determination to do something about all the violence, said Chapter Leader Alan Eitman.

There is still a large gang presence in the neighborhood, Eitman pointed out, but now, after the success of Peace Fest, the violence stops at the door.



In the hallway of a peaceful Walton HS are (from left) Dean of Security Orlando Ramos, school social worker Nadia Pastrana, Chapter Leader Alan Eitman and social worker Derek Motley. Ramos, Pastrana and Motley, along with Walton's principal Nicola Genco — herself a former school social worker — meet with gang leaders every week in a "Peace Fest" to keep the school cool.

Ramos, who became dean of security in February, set out almost immediately to tackle the gang problem. He talked to two rival gang members in the school and got them to admit that it would be very nice if they didn't constantly have to look over their shoulders out of fear of each other.

When he broached the idea of getting gang members to sit down on a regular basis he realized that the plan wouldn't work unless gang superiors outside the school approved.

Ramos arranged to meet with the leader of the Latin Kings. He went to this leader's home and had a 40-minute talk about peace. The Latin Kings leader was convinced. "You have my blessings,"

Ramos said he told him.

That opened the way. A few weeks later several other gangs agreed and the first Peace Fest was held. It's been growing ever since.

In fact, Ramos has had to turn away some outside gang members who wanted to join in. Peace Fest is only for Walton students.

The concept is working so well Ramos hopes other schools will pick up on it. So far, though, Walton is the only Bronx school doing it.

The idea is working far beyond anything Ramos said he hoped for.

"I'm so proud of these kids," Ramos said.

SPORTS

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DAILY NEWS

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NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

Friday, June 4, 1999

Gang parleys
cool off school

AT WALTON HIGH School in the Bronx, Principal Nicola Genco and her dean of security, Orlando Ramos, have devised a startling way to curb student violence.

They call it Peace Fest.

Every week for the past few months, Genco and Ramos have held meetings in Genco's spacious conference room with 25 to 30 of the school's gang leaders — including the heads of the Latin Kings, Crips, Bloods, Nietas, Five Percenters, Silenciosos, and Matatones.

The idea is to encourage the gangs — the leaders prefer to call them clubs or nations — to work out their differences. And meetings are not the only forum. Genco and Ramos also have set up a hotline to help with rumor control.

"Since we started, we've reduced violent incidents between gangs to zero," Ramos said yesterday.

The weekly powwows, as you might expect, have not gone over well with the Police Department or with school security officers, especially because Genco and Ramos have refused to let them in the meetings.

"They want me to identify gang members, and I won't do it," Ramos said. "You have to have the kids' trust. If you have a cop there, they just won't speak up. Besides, our security officers are no longer Board of Education employees" — not since Mayor Giuliani forced them under the NYPD.

Ramos says he has been grilled by police officials "as if I was a suspect" because of the novel program.

"I just hope he's not legitimizing the leadership of these gangs," said a police official who supervises school security.

The fact is, these gangs exist in every school in the city. For many students, they fill an emotional void. Even a former schools chancellor, Joe Fernandez, was a gang member in his youth.

As part of winning student trust, Genco and Ramos have agreed that business discussed in their meetings will be kept confidential, unless the members of Peace Fest vote otherwise.

Yesterday morning, I became the first outsider allowed to attend a Peace Fest. "They took a vote about having you," Genco said as I entered. The only condition was that I not write about any student by name.

"This is about respect and saving people's lives," Genco said. She has been an educator for 32 years, and in her nine years as principal at Walton she has seen three of her students killed and many others knifed or beaten.

"We're proud of these kids for what they do," she said.

One of the gang members raised his hand to politely correct her. "We're not kids, Miss Genco," he said. "Some of us are 18 or 19. We prefer to be called young adults."

Then the young adult, making it clear he's seen his share of violence, explained why he keeps coming to the meetings.

"It's about no nation-related fights, or violence jumping off around the perimeter of the school. If you're walking into a classroom with your beads and flags, some teachers think right away you're a gang member and won't amount to nothing. We're showing we can do something positive."

Another student with a Puerto Rican flag-design bandana wrapped around his head spoke next:

"We want to make school a neutral ground," he said.

"School is where you get your knowledge. You don't want to be worried each day when you come here about somebody coming up behind to jump you."

"We're maintaining peace within the school," a young woman said. "We're very popular now. Now others want to join."

One teenager said that when he attended Adlai Stevenson HS, he worried each morning about gang attacks on his way to school.

"Usually when it gets warm, you just act wild," he said. "Our teachers haven't lived this. They're living in a fantasy world. Not everyone is a gang homey 24-7. I got a kid, I got two jobs and going to school. These teachers shouldn't be into putting us down. They should be here to lift us up."

"In other schools, all their nations are fighting," another student said, "especially in the junior high schools. They're little knuckleheads who want to be like us. We need to get Peace Fest into the junior highs."

SEVERAL OF THE gang leaders said they never even knew who the principal was until the meetings started.

Now they all call her godmother.

"Everyone now, if they have a problem, they talk about it before it gets into the physical thing," another gang leader said. "If you don't have no respect for anyone, you don't respect yourself. To tell you the truth, since this thing started, I've made new friends... we're no longer rivals."

JUAN GONZALEZ



UNITED FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

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ALAN ETTMAN - CHAPTER LEADER

September 24, 2001

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing a letter of recommendation for my colleague Orlando Ramos. Currently, Mr. Ramos is the Assistant Principal in charge of Security at Walton High School. He has worked in this capacity for several years. During this time, Mr. Ramos has overseen significant changes in the tone of the school and the safety of faculty and students.

One of the reasons that Mr. Ramos has been successful in reducing the number of incidents at Walton is that he has created an atmosphere of respect among school administrators, all staff members and the students. He can exercise his authority yet retain his sense of camaraderie and empathy for the staff. Mr. Ramos will not resort to power plays or ego trips. On the contrary, Mr. Ramos acts as a colleague who must accomplish a challenging and daunting job. As a result, he is well respected, well known and well liked by the entire Walton community. He is a ubiquitous presence in the building who is diligent and energetic. He is visible throughout the building during the school and arranges his paperwork and administrative time for the early morning or late afternoon. It is not a stretch to suggest that every student and staff member (as well as many parents) know him and can approach him.

The job of leading a security team is a problematic one for many people. One has to deal with an often monolithic bureaucracy, restrictive rules, stubborn faculty members, recalcitrant students and an array of social problems, dysfunctional families, limited resources, and the like all while being highly visible and "in the line of fire." Despite the seemingly overwhelming obstacles, Mr. Ramos has been a most effective leader. The number of incidents have been markedly reduced over the past few years. The number of incidents involving staff members have also been dramatically decreased. There is a sense of order, control and respect for authority that was not always evident prior to his stewardship.

I would like to provide some specific details. Several years ago, Walton High School, like much of the Bronx, was a site for gang activity. Gang members brazenly displayed their colors and gestures, routinely missed classes and perambulated throughout the halls. Mr. Ramos spent a considerable amount of time and effort reaching out to gang members and leaders. He often met with them outside of school and frequently outside of school hours. He got members of rival gangs to meet and discuss their issues. Consequently, Walton became a neutral site for gangs. There were few, if any, gang-related altercations, gang colors and gestures were not publicly displayed, misguided youngsters were allowed to leave gangs safely and a sense of security and safety was established. It was largely through Mr. Ramos' leadership, diligence and creativity that this program was so successful.

I am glad that Orlando Ramos is pursuing other career aspirations. Even though he will be sorely missed when he leaves Walton, his talents will be employed positively elsewhere. He has the sense of justice to treat everyone equally and fairly, has the skills to unify people while he exerts authority, has the respect of all people at Walton and the sense to capitalize on people's strengths and not their weaknesses. I am glad to recommend Orlando Ramos and am certain he will be a worthwhile addition to any school.

Yours truly,



ALAN ETTMAN
United Federation of Teachers, Chapter Leader