

## **'HUSTLAZ' AT THE HARBOR — Spate of downtown violence raise specter of growing gang presence**

By Stephen Janis, *Investigative Voice*, April 28, 2009

Early Friday evening outside the ESPN Zone restaurant in Baltimore's Inner Harbor, tourists stood in shock as a group of young men allegedly wearing bandannas viciously beat a 14-year-old Michigan youth.

The melee, which police said was prompted by an exchange of words and left the teen badly bruised but not seriously injured outside the Power Plant attraction, carried over to the middle of the street as stunned onlookers tried to intervene.

“My brother was working at the ESPN Zone and he said they were just beating the guy up right in front of everybody right on Pratt Street,” recounted Malik Johnson, 19, an employee of the Swatch Store in the Pratt Street Pavilion.

“It was really just wild. He was like, 'What is going on down here?'" Johnson said.

Friday's incident may have been an anomalous outbreak of violence at the city's premier tourist attraction. Or it could be a sign of deepening gang influence, both merchants and city officials say.

But since a Saturday altercation that began near the Inner Harbor Amphitheater and led to the stabbing of two Baltimore teens, the debate over what prompted the rash of violence has heightened as city leaders seek proactive measures to improve safety.

The Saturday incident, which allegedly began after an exchange of words between a female and male, escalated into a full-scale brawl that spread to the downtown Gallery Mall two blocks up the street, witnesses said Tuesday.

Police have arrested two suspects in connection with the stabbing.

### **POLICE BEEFING UP PATROLS**

The melee has prompted the Baltimore Police Department to promise added police presence downtown, including foot patrols, a move supported by City Councilman Bill Cole, whose 11th district includes the Inner Harbor.

“It was like a Fourth of July size crowd, and you don't have summer deployment in April,” said Cole, adding that police estimated upwards of 6,000 people visited the Inner Harbor Saturday.

Cole said added police presence was only one preventive measure city officials need to consider.

“I think it’s a matter of offering alternatives,” he said. “We have given serious consideration on ways to give young people something to do.”

Still, the question of whether gang influence prompted the violent outbreak remained up for debate among people who work at the tourist stop.

“I’ve seen members of the YGF (Young Guerilla Family) down here, and members of the Dirty Slobs; there are gangs down here,” said Johnson, the Swatch Store employee. Other merchants who did not want to speak on the record echoed Johnson's observation.

But others cautioned that a few incidents may not be indicative of a larger trend.

“I think it’s too early to say if it’s gangs or just kids acting out,” said Nate Scroggins, who manages a clothing store.

“I don’t think we can tell yet if it’s a problem; it’s too early to pass judgment on what’s really going on.”

Business leaders admitted that witnesses saw some gang signs flashed just prior to the melee Saturday but said that, in general, there have been few complaints from merchants or visitors of gang activity downtown.

“There has been some, but it’s sporadic,” said Kirby Fowler, president of the Downtown Partnership.

“In general we don’t have a problem in this area.”

## BUSINESSES PAY FOR MORE PATROLS

But a few blocks up from the Inner Harbor along the city’s red-light district known as The Block, Fowler said continued crime has prompted businesses to pool money for added police presence.

Recently Lou Hershey, owner of the Mousetrap, closed his bar in part because of what he called a “bad element,” but privately bar owners said gangs descend on The Block at night, using it as place to congregate and do business.

Fowler said bar owners are taking proactive measure to improve safety, paying extra money to increase police presence.

“We just completed the deal with the police that will put extra officers in the area from 7 p.m. to 3 a.m., Thursday, Friday and Saturday,” Fowler said.

Colonel Rick Hite, who used to run the police department’s now disbanded community relations division, said the growing independence of city youth is leading to greater numbers of gang members.

“More kids are taking ownership of their lives, and in some cases they're choosing gangs because they're a lure,” said Hite, who has worked to extricate teens from gangs through a now defunct program called “Get Out of the Game” that offered assistance in finding jobs for young people who promised to stop dealing drugs.

“They seem on the surface to offer more than we do, and we have to work harder to make inroads before they join.”

Hite said the recent spate of violence in a high-profile area will hopefully focus attention on the needs of city youth.

“They used to call it wilding,” Hite said. “It’s like acting out until you get attention.”