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Teens hold march to protest deaths in their community

BY CAROLYN P. SMITH
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Kestulis Murphy, 18, said he's so tired of all the killings and desperately wants them to stop, but he said the sad fact is that murder and living in the ghetto go hand in hand.

Murphy said every day his prayer is to wake up to a gun-free, violence-free, drug-free community.

"Young adults are not respecting each other," Murphy said. "I lost my best friend, Santonio Raper, a few weeks ago. He was killed for no reason. It's so hard living in the ghetto. You go to bed hearing gunshots and you wake up hearing them. It shouldn't be that way."

Murphy and several members of his class at the Emerson Park Youthbuilders of Tomorrow program on State Street in East St. Louis were a part of a march against violence that was held in O'Fallon, Tuesday.

The group, mostly young people, marched from U.S. 50 to St. Clair Bowl on Old Collinsville Road, the site where SWIC basketball player Obian Hawkins, 22, was killed last week. Anthony Bradley, 16, of Cahokia has been charged with murder in the case.

Keith Antone Willis Sr., principal of the Emerson Park Youth Build School, said, "Kids are being killed everywhere. It's stupid and destructive. Say no to violence. Say no to killing."

Willis said he and the students at the school lost one of their classmates when Raper died. "He was going somewhere in life. He was one of those kids you just knew was going to make something of himself," Willis said.

Raper, of the 1800 block of Ohio Street in East St. Louis, was gunned down near his home on July 11. Reddie T. Bean, 20, also of the 1800 block of Ohio Street, was charged with murder in the case.

"Stop the Violence. Increase the Peace," the marchers shouted as they lifted their signs high.

The signs reminded young people that if they're caught carrying a gun, they'll get hard federal time. And some signs said, "Don't shoot I want to grow up." These signs had the picture of a young boy about 5 on them.

"Every life is important. Whether they live in Belleville, East St. Louis, O'Fallon, Atlanta, St. Louis or Memphis, human life is important," Willis said.

Police officers from the O'Fallon and East St. Louis Police Department were a part of the event to encourage the youngsters to stop the killing. Members of a group called Cease Fire also were also on hand.

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