

'WE HAVE BEEN WHERE THEY ARE'

Quilt to honor teens killed in violence

Lowell

By Jennifer Myers

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In the first hours of 2011, eight partygoers, ages 14 to 20, were shot in the basement of 104 Grand St. in the Lower Highlands.

This week, their friends at United Teen Equality Center will begin work on a "peace quilt" at the American Textile History Museum, to send a different message about the city's youth.

The young men may not look like quilters, but this is not your traditional quilt.

"We are taking an old-fashioned technique and making it relevant; a message board in fabric," said Sue Bunker, the museum's education director. "You have to look at it like, 'If there was a blank wall on the side of a building, what would you write on it?'"

According to police, Jameson Phoun, 20, and Sothy Voeun, 19, were asked to leave the party following an argument earlier in the night. They allegedly returned around 1 a.m. and

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opened fire with two .22-caliber rifles. Seven were left wounded. Corinna Oeur, 20, was killed.

Tommy Sam, 19, lost one of his best friends that night.

"She was everything I wanted to be," Sam said of Oeur, adding that she was one of the only people who kept in touch with him while he was serving six months in prison last year for threatening his mother's landlord, whom he said had been harassing her and his little brothers. She encouraged him and always remained a true friend.

"She was a sweet girl who

had no problems with anybody. She was going back to school to get her GED," he said of Oeur.

Four of Thareth Chea's friends were shot that night.

"It was right next to my mom's house," said Chea, 19. "I was lucky I left that day."

The UTEC group, along with Evan Ortiz, 20, Julian Rivera, 17, and UTEC Streetworker Johnny Chheng, is slated today to begin work on the quilt, a 10-week process. The project is funded through a grant from the Lowell Cultural Council.

They will use silk-screening techniques they learned during a nine-week program at the Textile Museum, funded by a grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Council, last year.

During that program, the teens expressed themselves through T-shirts with messages that included "Make peace, not war."

The T-shirts are on display in the museum's Textile Learning Center through May 1.

The quilt will include sections for each teen who died violently since UTEC's inception 11 years ago. Space will be left to add the names of future casualties.

"A quilt is a metaphor for community; all of these small pieces brought together to form something that is much larger than any one piece," said Frances Killam, a local artist working on the project. "A quilt is what you pull up to your chin when you go to sleep at night. It keeps you

warm and gives you comfort."

Museum President and CEO Jim Coleman sees the project as a natural extension of the museum's mission, connecting Lowell's industrial past with its present.

"Our mission, first and foremost, is to tell the American story, while at the same time making it relevant in the community," said Coleman. "While we weave textiles into what we do, we are also trying to do some nontraditional things."

The young men involved agree that the violence will not stop until community leaders provide role models for the young men and women growing up in poor neighborhoods.

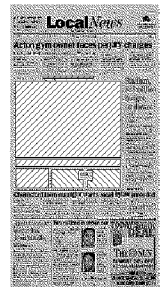
"There are a lot of us at UTEC who have been trying to reach out to the younger kids and let them know that we have been where they are," said Sam. "All you need is a little bit of rope to pull yourself up."

Chheng said that while the streetworkers are out every day trying to quell violence, he does not see a lot of support from the Greater Lowell community.

"Everyone has something to say at a press conference when something happens, but then they are gone," he said. "There is a lack of programs to keep these kids busy and they use their aggressiveness to cause violence in the streets.

"If leadership does not step up, nothing will change," he added.

"In 10 years it will be the same — more white people will be talking about us."



The Peace Quilt will be displayed at the museum and at the Quilt Festival at the Tsongas Center this summer. It will find a permanent home at UTEC's Hurd Street headquarters.

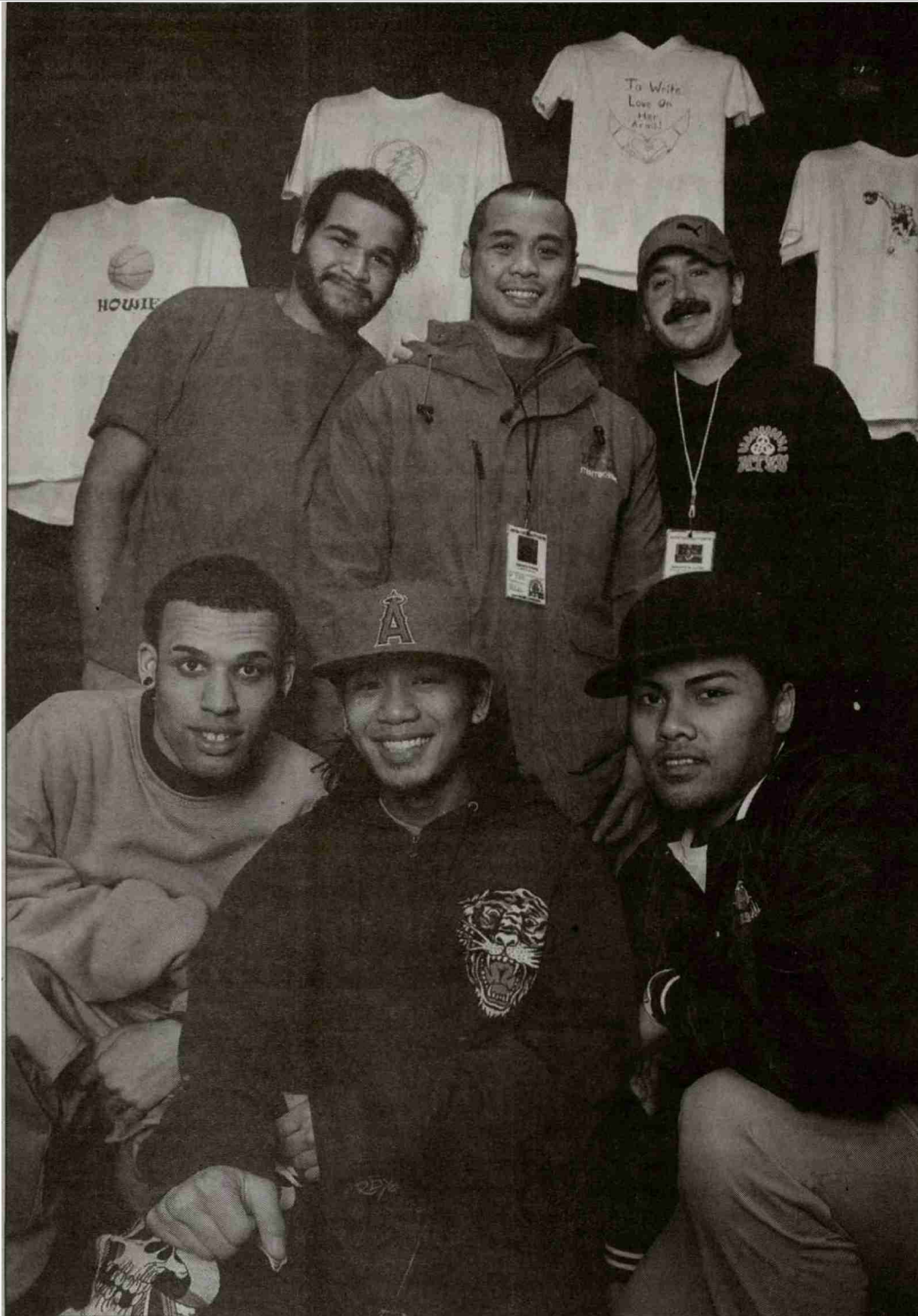
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United Teen Equality Center
streetworker Johnny Chheng



From left, United Teen Equality Center members Julian Rivera, Tommy Sam, Evan Ortiz and Thareth Chea, all of Lowell, sit with some of the silk-screening materials they will use to make a peace quilt in a program at the American Textile History Museum. The group has already made T-shirts with anti-violence messages.

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Front, from left, are UTEC members Evan Ortiz, Tommy Sam and Thareth Chea, 17. Rear from left are Julian Rivera, 17, UTEC streetworker Johnny Chheng and cultural-arts coordinator Jonathan Lunde, all of Lowell. They will make a peace quilt, and have already made T-shirts, as part of a program at the American Textile History Museum.

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