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BRIDGEPORT

## Forum seeks to reverse culture of violence

By Amanda Cuda

BRIDGEPORT — Have you ever known someone who had been bullied? Who committed suicide? Who was a victim of domestic violence? Who was assaulted or robbed?

Donna Thompson-Bennett asked those questions of a group of about 50 people gathered at Congregation B'Nai Israel in Bridgeport on Wednesday evening for a forum on violence and how it has become a major public health issue both locally and nationally.

The meeting was the third in a series sponsored by the Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition aimed at examining how violence permeates our communities and finding solutions to the problem.

At Wednesday's forum,



File photo

**Donna Thompson-Bennett holds a photo of her son as she speaks at the Board of Education in 2010.**

participants were asked to raise their hands if they or someone they knew had experienced each act of violence Thompson-Bennett rattled off. In a room filled with people of diverse ages,

racess and economic backgrounds, there was only one who didn't raise her hand.

Thompson-Bennett, a former coalition board member, said the exercise shows how pervasive violence, in its many forms, is in our culture.

"Violence occurs not only with guns, but with hands and with language," she said.

Though the forums began taking place before the Dec. 14 massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, that tragedy, like Thompson-Bennett's exercise, emphasized that violence can happen anywhere and to anyone. "(Violence) is not a mayor's problem or a police chief problem — it's our problem," said Mary Pat Healy, coalition executive director. "This happens in our urban areas and now we

know that it happens in our suburban areas. The time is right and the time is now to put forth short-term and long-term solutions to this problem."

Both Healy and Thompson-Bennett said the key to stopping violence is for all members of the community to take an active role in changing the culture that allows incidents like Sandy Hook — and the violence that has affected Bridgeport and other urban centers for years. By that token, participants in the forum were asked to divide themselves into groups and come up with possible ways to change the culture in Bridgeport.

The solutions suggested in the brainstorming sessions might have been expected: offering more community centers, pro-

viding training to young people on settling disputes peaceably and helping parents feel comfortable visiting their children's schools, not fearing they'll be blamed for behavioral issues the children might be having. Though it didn't seem new ground was being broken, Thompson-Bennett said the fact that so many people were willing to participate and exchange ideas was encouraging.

"I think the fact that people came out on a very cold evening speaks to the concerns that so many members of our diverse community have on this issue," she said.

Those who attended the forum included local law enforcement officers, politicians, community activists, educators and even a group

of teens from the Bridgeport Teen Leadership Institute. Bridgeport Mayor Bill Finch gave an impassioned speech to the group about the need for stronger gun laws. Though he acknowledged that violence has many factors, it is clear stronger regulation of guns can make a difference, he said.

"I would point you to the civilized countries that have strong gun control laws and don't have the level of gun violence (that we have)," he said.

The coalition will host another forum on violence prevention next month. Details haven't been finalized. For updates, call 203-549-0075, ext. 10.

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