

Forum sheds light on city violence
By Brian Hicks
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9th Circuit Solicitor Scarlett Wilson

Marquita Smith thought she'd found an easy way to make some money.

A few years ago, the Berkeley County woman convinced a few people to rob a drug dealer friend of hers. As it turned out, the man didn't have any money, and he ended up dead as a result.

Scarlett Wilson, the 9th District Solicitor, told a group of about 50 people this story Saturday at a community forum on violence. Her point was that some people don't understand how serious their actions are under the law.

Smith would not plead guilty to any crime, arguing that she had not been present at the murder. She demanded a jury trial.

She got 30 years in prison.

That was just one sad tale of crime in the Lowcountry shared at the Community Partnership's "Impact of Violence on our Community Series" Saturday at Burke High School. The partnership is a group of 15 people working with Charleston police to cut down on violence in the community.

"We want to raise awareness first and foremost, and pulling the community together is one of our goals," said Carolyn Brown, a member of the group and the Charleston Weed and Seed program coordinator. "There are a lot of people working on this, but they are all working separately. We need to pull them together to get the message out."

On Saturday, the forum included testimonials and biographical stories of growing up in Charleston from Stephen Wright, director of community security with the Housing Authority;

Maj. John Dunmyer III, director of JROTC at Burke High; and Willie Campbell of His Way Ministry.

Public Defender Ashley Pennington, Deputy Charleston County Coroner Bobbi Jo O'Neal and Wilson gave the crowd stories that they hoped would serve as ammunition in efforts to stem crime in the city.

"I do not like putting children away," Wilson said. "In South Carolina, if you are 16 and commit a violent crime, you are tried as an adult."

O'Neal said that drug abuse needs to be treated much the same as violent crime, as drugs cause two to three times as many deaths as homicide in the county. She said her job is the last stop on a life that goes wrong.

"You don't want to meet me professionally," O'Neal said. "You don't want me to show up on your doorstep to tell you your child made a poor decision."

The Community Partnership plans to hold regular forums to educate local residents on crime. This forum was directed at parents. In the fall, they hope to give a program aimed at teens.

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