

# Getting out of Gangs



Police officer Moses E. Robinson speaking to at-risk youth

## **Police officer attacks the 'merits' of gangs**

At-risk youth attend seminar

By Gene Warner

News Staff Reporter

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Gangs are a lie. They preach concepts like loyalty and "having your back." They turn "snitching" into the greatest sin. And they print up T-shirts with glorified myths like "Death Before Dishonor."

Moses E. Robinson, a Rochester police officer and an expert on East Coast youth gangs, provided a different view of gangs Monday morning before about 150 potentially at-risk youths attending a gang- and violence-prevention program at Medaille College.

"If you can show me a good gang, without the gang violence, I'll give you \$100," Robinson said. "All gangs that are real gangs commit violence."

Robinson is a highly dynamic speaker. He engages his audience, pacing back and forth on the stage. He fills his talk with anecdotes, genuine stories about pain-filled youths and all-too-real violence. And he spices his message with street language that had the young people listening intently on a day off from school.

And when one of them wasn't paying any attention, he had a neighboring youth wake that kid up. "You will not sleep in my presence," he said.

He attacked the concept of "family loyalty" in gang membership.

"Do you know that most gang members are killed by their own?" he asked. "It's true, and some of you here know that."

Robinson, a school resource officer at Rochester's East High School and president of the Western New York chapter of the East Coast Gang Investigators Association, made up a Buffalo-based scenario to get his point across about gang retaliation.

"Me and T" grew up in the Fruit Belt, since Moby Dick was a tadpole, he said. They both left school in junior high for the lure of the streets — money, girls, cars. Until the Moses character gets "jammed up," or arrested. Then he gets released on bail, leading T and the other gang members to make a few basic assumptions:

"Moses signed papers," they say. "I know he did. He's going to tell on all of us. We've got to take him out. What do they say in the movies? "We love you, Moses. But this is business."

Robinson then looked out at his audience, perhaps finding someone who snickered at the story.

"You think that's a joke?" he asked. "Talk to the people in the cemeteries [about] the same people they thought had their back."

Monday's program, which drew young people from about 65 Erie County-funded agencies, was hosted by Erie County Youth Services. The daylong program, which also featured former University at Buffalo basketball star Modie Cox, was labeled the first phase of a "Youth Gang and Violence Prevention Program."

The next phase will be a "youth-led and youth-developed" program that can be sent out into the community, said David Rust, director of the Erie County Youth Bureau. And the young people will help shape exactly what that program will be.

"We want to empower them," Rust said. "We want to ask them what's going to work. We don't want to tell them. We want them to create it."

During his talk, Robinson also delivered a message to about 40 youth program directors who accompanied the young people.

This time, he told a true story from last Halloween weekend, when a 17-year-old Rochester East High School student was shot in the back and killed outside a house party.

The following day, a Monday, Robinson was called to a class where a student had put his head on the desk and refused to leave. Robinson walked up to the youth and said, "Son, I need you to come with me."

The student didn't respond to two such entreaties. Robinson quickly asked a few nearby students to move away from their desks, in case the situation became physical.

Finally, Robinson coaxed the boy out of the room. Walking behind him in the hall, Robinson sympathetically asked him what was wrong. The young man burst into tears, saying the homicide victim has been his best friend, and he didn't know he'd died until he got to school that morning.

Robinson later provided the moral to that story:

"Take time in your approach to kids, to consider what they may be going through at any moment. You don't know unless you try."



**Magdalena Sanchez**

**Benito Amaya**

## **Victim of Violence, Gang Member Hold Much in Common**

By Stan Friedman

BELL GARDENS, CA (December 8, 2009) – Magdalena Sanchez came to Los Angeles in 1975 as an 18-year-old fleeing violence in her native El Salvador. She knew no English. She started attending First Covenant Church in Los Angeles with her mother because the congregation was ministering to the influx of Hispanics in the area.

Eight years ago, Benito Amaya, then 21, walked away from the gang he had started.

On Saturday, Sanchez stood on stage in her red doctoral robe helping hand out diplomas and certificates to students during the Centro Hispano de Estudios Teológicos (CHET) graduation ceremonies. Later she attended the school's 20th anniversary celebration and was seated several tables away from Amaya, a first-year CHET student who is preparing to become a pastor.

Both hope their lives, which have been impacted by the school, will inspire others.

Sanchez wore the robe for the first time Saturday, a moment that was special to her and inspiring to the students. She had earned her PhD in education at the University of Southern California, but did not march in her own graduation ceremony. She didn't even own a robe.

Then CHET President Ed Delgado asked Sanchez, who is a member of CHET's Board of Directors and teaches part-time at the school, to help distribute the diplomas. So she hurriedly rented the robe.

Sanchez had not walked in her own graduation ceremony because she didn't feel a part of the larger class, but Saturday's event was a rich reminder that she is part of community, she says.

Sanchez adds, "It was very special for the students to have a Hispanic woman with a PhD, especially a Hispanic immigrant. It shows them what's possible."

Sanchez has been involved with CHET in various ways since arriving in the United States. She was attending First Covenant when the church closed and used money from the sale of their building to fund the startup of a Hispanic Covenant church in Bell Gardens as well as provide seed money for the school.

The people at each of the institutions have offered encouragement during her journey from her days sewing in the city's garment district to attaining her doctorate. She is grateful that the school has been there to help her and especially train Hispanic women for ministry.

"The denomination has to encourage gender equality and they do," she says, emphatically. "That is why I love the Covenant."

Today, in addition to her classes at CHET, Sanchez teaches at Porterville College in Porterville, California, and works with a program sponsored by the University of California – Los Angeles that encourage Hispanics to pursue careers in the sciences and medicine.

Amaya started the gang when he was age 14 and selling drugs while virtually living on the streets. He and his friends formed the gang to protect themselves from other gangs that were angered by the infringement on their drug territory.

"I was influenced by power and money," he recalls. But by the time he turned 21, the violence was overwhelming Amaya. He remembered that he had gone to a gang intervention program five years prior and the speaker saying, "What good is it for a man to gain the world and lose his soul."

Amaya made his way to a church and pleaded for God to help him. "I said, 'God, if you're real, I need you to make yourself real to me,'" he says. "I felt like something came out of me. I started sweating and shaking." And then he felt overwhelmed by God.

Amaya, now 29 and happily married, started attending church and has been trying to study as much as possible and as often as possible since that day, he says. His pastor suggested he consider attending CHET.

Delgado says Amaya is "a top student."

"The theological studies bring a different perspective to my world," says Amaya. The benefits have been more than educational. "CHET has filled my life with a special family."

Amaya, who is a maintenance worker at a local hospital, plans to continue his education after CHET.

"I'm praying that I can continue to Fuller Seminary," says Amaya with passion. "I believe in my heart that God is calling me to be a pastor."

He adds, "I know that the Master will open doors for me." Those doors, he hopes, include the ones at a juvenile detention center where officials would not let him speak to teenagers due to his past.

In the meantime, Amaya says, CHET is helping him to reach for his future.



Frances Hernandez, 24, former gang member

# Sense of belonging? Ex-gang member working for a better life

She credits officer for helping her see beyond gang involvement

**By Ashley Fielding**

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A female gang leader showed up at Frances Hernandez' house 10 years ago and told her to join SUR-13 or expect regular beatings.

Then, she slapped her.

At 14, Hernandez was lonely and vulnerable. Her parents were divorced - her father was absent, her mother an alcoholic - and her friends were few.

With the threat of violence, the gangster had both intimidated Hernandez and offered her something she thought she needed.

"I thought by joining the gang ... that I would have friends ... and that I would have protection," Hernandez said.

After she let four male gang members beat her into SUR-13, Hernandez was without a doubt a "Sureño" or a member of the gang.

She wore dark blue, branded herself with a SUR-13 tattoo and never hesitated to fight when rival gang members ventured into her territory.

"I guess at that time, you know, we thought that, you know, we were fighting for something, for respect and to be known," Hernandez said.

Today, Hernandez acknowledges that she wanted to fight because she was always angry. After her parents' divorce when she was 12, Hernandez watched as her mother would get drunk and say mean things to her. Her father had pretty much disappeared.

"I felt alone, I didn't feel like I had any help from anyone," Hernandez said. "I guess that's why I wouldn't get out (of the gang) or anything, because I guess I felt relieved when I would get high or take out my anger on other people."

Her fellow gang members had similar backgrounds and needs.

Lt. Scott Ware, commander of the Gainesville-Hall Gang Task Force, said most of the gang members he encounters have joined because their emotional needs are not being met.

"Typically, there's a void that is met by gang members," Ware said.

Gangs create an opportunity for marginalized teenagers to connect, belong and feel respected, said Michael Holosko, an expert on gang behavior and a professor at the University of Georgia's School of Social Work.

"You wear your gang colors, you get a tattoo. It's like the military, you know?" Holosko said. "You put your uniform on and you're affiliated with something that immediately people recognize you as a part of."

The majority of Hall County's 370 documented gang members are Latino teenagers who come from fatherless homes, Ware said.

For Latino teenagers, gangs serve as a cultural comfort zone, Holosko said.

Joe Amerling, the vice president of the Georgia Gang Investigators Association and a local gang investigator, agrees.

"They came here as a minority, and for the most part, white people went after them and they bonded together for protection," said Amerling. "They have a fear of law enforcement, and there's always a fear of deportation and there's always a lack of trust."

Black gangs formed for similar reasons 30 years ago, said Bobby Jones, a school resource officer at C.W. Davis Middle School.

"There was a need for everybody to huddle together," Jones said.

But today, the majority of gangs in Georgia are Latinos, Amerling said. Aside from the need to stick together, the gang culture perpetuates the Latino ideal of machismo, he said.

"In the Hispanic culture, the male is the dominant role model regardless, you know?" Amerling said. "If he's 14 and there's no dad in the household, guess what? He's running things, and mom's going to be subservient to him and so are the sisters. And that's just how it is."

But "how it is" becomes a dangerous place to be. Just two weeks ago, Juan "Baby P-Nut" Gomez became the first person in seven years to die as a result of gang violence in Hall County. Gomez, who was 16, grew up without his father. His brothers, members of La Onda 05, were his role models, said their sister, Martha Garcia.

Before Gomez died, he had followed in his brothers' footsteps and had risen through the ranks in the gang to become a shot-caller.

Hernandez also gained respect as a gang member. Not long after she joined SUR-13, Hernandez had become a notorious fighter that fellow gangsters would call on when they needed support.

She had also become a high school dropout and a drug addict who spent a month in a Texas jail after running away to Mexico when she was 15.

Amerling was the main reason that Hernandez got out of the gang, she said. The investigator would speak to her on the streets, and remind her that as a bilingual resident, she could make a better future for herself than to be a frequent visitor of detention centers.

Hernandez calls the investigator a friend who was there for her at her lowest point in life.

"Somehow he got close to me," she said. "I felt like he believed in me. ... I felt like he was the only one who saw why I was doing everything and why I was the way I was."

Now, Hernandez is a happily married 24-year-old who is trying to get her GED so that she can go to college and study criminal justice.

But she said leaving the gang was difficult. At 17, Hernandez decided she did not want to be a part of the gang anymore. But she said every time she would try to separate from the group, her fellow gang members would come find her at home.

Where teenagers live is just as big a factor in whether they join a gang as their need to belong, Amerling said.

Hernandez was recruited by SUR-13 partly because she lived on Stringer Avenue. Likewise, the Gomez brothers grew up on Atlanta Street in La Onda territory.

"Kids that are involved in sports and in church and who are in school normally aren't going to be in a gang," Amerling said. "But it's the neighborhood's problem, too. Sometimes, to get away from a gang, you've got to move from the gang."

Hernandez was able to move before it was too late.

And today, all that remains from her gang days is regret, a rap sheet and distrust of her peers.

Hernandez still has the SUR-13 brand on her arm and three dots next to her eye, which remind her of "Mi vida loca" or "my crazy life" as a teenaged gangster. But she has covered up the "laugh now, cry later" tattoo that gang members get to justify their reckless behavior.

"I know that I wasn't a good person back then, and that I did a lot of bad things," she said. "Now, I look back, and I know I'm really lucky that I changed my life around and that I didn't end up ruining my life."

For kids, young adults and parents:

## ask a former gang member



photo by Janjaap Dekker

**My name is Armando T. Frias.** I'm an ex-gang member and am currently doing life. I've been doing time since I was 12 years old. I started gangbanging at 9 years old. I've been through juvenile hall, boys' ranches, group homes, California Youth Authority, county jail and now prison.

I want to share my experiences with everyone. So that you, your kids and loved ones will not have to go through the pain, suffering and heartache that I have gone through because of my stupidity and lack of knowledge.

I'm here to help those who wish to be helped and enlighten those who have questions. This is my way of making amends to a society I once terrorized.

I'm here to share my advice, opinions and experiences on gangs and to answer any

questions you may have. Ask what you'd like, I'm here to help.

-- Armando T. Frías

**Q: I saw the documentary on Nuestra Familia, It really made me think a lot of things, such as how it really isn't worth it, but on. But on the other hand it's hard, because it's a form of respect that you get from your homies and your enemies.**

**What I wanted ask you is if it's really worth being a down gang member to earn your respect in the streets?**

**A:** When I first stepped away, I was sick for weeks. I made a choice I never thought I'd make. I had good friends of mine questioning if it was true, because they couldn't believe it. But when it came down to it, the respect I thought I had was gone as soon as I stepped away.

You see, we often wrongly define respect when it's really fear that you're putting into your homies and enemies.

Once I got broke off my time, people started counting me out, figuring I ain't ever getting out. "So-called respect is hard to earn, but easily taken." If you're quick to put in work, people fear you, because they know you won't hesitate at any given moment. If they cross you the wrong way, it could be them on the other side of your barrel. It ain't worth it, because it is a temporary form of respect. It's more fear than anything. I know of people who are still in good graces with their homies, but they're locked up and their own so-called homies are trying to get at their girlfriends, sisters or disrespecting their family. Now tell me, what kind of respect is that?

The only way to earn a righteous respect is by removing one's self from that crowd and group. Because with them, respect will NEVER be gained.

Armando

**Q: I work at a juvenile correctional facility. What advice can you give me to help those who glorify the prison lifestyle. Some youngsters really believe they want to go to prison.**

**A:** First off, young Norteños don't hold no respect for authority figures. To them, they're cops. You must get them to respect you as a man and not a badge if you want them to hear you out. By doing that, converse with them about sports, video games, music, etc. That will bring them out of their zone of trying to act hardcore. Once you build that communication, trust will follow.

It's best to talk to them individually that way it takes away the pressure of what their homies might think.

Gangbanging is a dirty game, let them know to get ready for the pain and heartaches they will have to endure, because when you're locked up, the world continues to turn. Their girlfriends will move on and continue their lives. So prepare for the Dear John letters. One thing you will have to do is leave your family and friends behind.

In a prison gang, you got to get ready to pick up the steel and put it work. If you refuse you, will be the one getting the steel put on you. You can come to prison for 3 years but leave after serving 15 years, or you might wind up doing life. In prison, ain't no half-stepping.

Just so them youngsters know, most of the time, you'll be moving on your own people. Norteños are the worst enemies of Norteños, and Sureños are the worst enemies of Sureños. Yes, the war is against each other, but most of the time you're hitting or moving on your own group, all because of power struggles, jealousy, envy, etc. I got friends I grew up with since childhood who are now my enemies because of the gang.

All you can do is share this info with them. Some will listen, most will learn on their own experiences.

**Q: How is it that you can just leave everything that you have known all your life? Almost everyone in my family is gang related and I have tried to break away but I don't know no other life style.**

**It's hard to live and be like other people, you know, not having to worry about being killed or anything. I would like that but I really can't see myself going against my blood as much as I may want to, I can't. What do you think i should do?**

**A:** I understand your situation. It's hard to break a cycle that runs deep through your family. For example, if I were to get out tomorrow and my old enemies were to see me, they won't care if I'm a changed man. So I'll be forced to still watch my back.

Ain't nothing wrong with being proud of who you are or where you're from. But one thing you must ask yourself is, what do you want out of life? The choices you make determine the life you live.

You're guilty by association because of your family. Nobody's telling you to turn your back on your family. But just like the saying goes, "only the strong survive." To be able to succeed in life and be somebody, you must have the determination to change. It won't be easy, there will be many obstacles you will overcome and believe it or not, when your family sees your potential in the positive things you CAN and WILL do in your life, they will root you on and support you.

Life is too precious to end up stuck on the shelf for the rest of your life. There is so much talent and potential within our Raza but we find ourselves behind these concrete walls, limited in the things we can do to showcase our skills.

If we weren't blinded by the illusions of this fairytale "cause," who knows what good we could have accomplished?

Don't be added to this group of wasted talent. I'm rooting for you, lil brother, keep your chin up and stay strong!

Armando

**Q: I would like to know how prison life has changed you?**

**A:** Well, first off, I ain't a complete changed man. I still got old flaws and habits. But what has caused me to make changes ain't prison. It's the situation I found myself in. I was one who promoted the Norteño cause to the fullest! I knew I could one day die or end up doing life in prison because of my beliefs, but was willing to make the sacrifice.

The change came when I got busted and seen my so-called brothers/homies telling on me, backstabbing me and trying to run my reputation through the mud. I noticed the greed, betrayal and envy that surrounded me.

The "Cause" that I was willing to sacrifice my freedom and life for did not EXIST! It was a ploy. The "cause" is a ploy used to manipulate our young Raza.

That's when I realized that my loyalties and priorities weren't right. My family, my son is who I need to be loyal to. That was my mistake, living for a fairytale "cause" when I should have been living for my family. My family has always been there for me, through thick and thin, unlike my so-called homies who crack under pressure. That's real talk!

Armando

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**Been there, done that**

## **Local leaders need to incorporate available solutions in the fight against gang violence**

By [Andres Romero](#) 08/20/2009

How many more committee meetings are needed before City Hall and other involved agencies will admit there is no stopping gang violence, at least by them?

Don't get the wrong idea. There is a way to turn things around, only it won't be found in any city meeting of otherwise well-intended but still ineffectual professionals working on the problem.

Recently, the Pasadena Weekly reported that the city paid an outside agency to study the problem, and for \$33,000, the agency reported what was already pretty well-known — that part of the solution was in grassroots involvement with the kids, young adults and the parents caught up in Pasadena's and Altadena's expanding gang culture.

To have contracted outside its own resources to find this out from a private company boggles the mind. All any of these city officials would have to do is hit the streets and meet with the parents and gang members. (You know, like when it's election time?) Instead, they continue forming committees made up of people from the same governing agencies and community organizations who end up doing little more than patting themselves on the back as they exit each meeting without accomplishing a damn thing.

Granted, in some cases some of these people have actually come up with good ideas, but they are unable to implement their own findings. Why? They represent authority and don't have credibility on the street. Street gangs are not impressed by who you are or the position you hold.

Another reason is some of these officials are clueless about the gang culture, thus never truly committed to seeing through any solutions. These organizations that say they are making an impact on gang violence prevention, then selling it to City Hall with inflated reports to justify their funding, need to step to the side because they are wasting taxpayer dollars and taking up resources that can be better applied.

The outsiders the city turned to for answers came to the same conclusion that I have been preaching all along: that community organizations need grassroots leaders, regardless of who they once were. I'm referring to former gang members, as well as other residents who grew up in Pasadena — people who know the streets and the "players" and are not afraid to walk up to a group of hardened gang members. I'm also talking about ex-cons who have long since been released and proven themselves to be productive citizens.

As things stand now, our government and community organizations are out of touch. There is no one hitting the streets at night, when intervention is most needed. They have no experience or background to know where to begin. It takes a certain type of person, not just law enforcement, to go in to the "jungle." And that isn't a handshaking politician

or some administrator with a degree in human behavior.

The story says “some high-risk individuals are already hard core and unresponsive.” It’s not that they can’t be reached — the problem lies with the type of people who are doing the reaching. I can’t understand why men like Tim Rhambo — who can meet with gang members and their “leadership” — were not embraced as a valuable asset in intervention.

When people begin to look past their reservations and allow former gang members and grassroots residents to be part of the solution, they will understand how things that could save a child’s life can be accomplished.

For a third of the money that was given to the outsiders, I would be able to give you recommendations, but I would personally see them through and not leave town. Think about it; who knows more about gang and racial violence besides law enforcement than ex-gang members? Who is more knowledgeable about street life and the game of survival?

Unfortunately, today I find myself in prison, wishing I was out there putting in work to save a life! The information I’m receiving from home is that nothing continues to be done with every new committee and group that is formed. But soon I’ll be out and once again committed to doing what I once passionately did before making the mistake of ending up here, and that was working as a gang counselor, mostly with my own funds and resources. Whether I’m welcomed or supported by City Hall and society really doesn’t matter, because the community will still be supportive.

You say you are serious about ending gang violence? Then forget these committees and invite in those who have been there and done that. It’s time to set aside differences and attitudes because it’s not about us, but kids killing kids. We already possess the valuable assets and experience needed to make a difference.

We can’t stop gang violence entirely, but we can prevent most of it with the right people working on the problem.

*Andres Romero, a former independent drug and gang counselor, can be reached at V54733, California Rehabilitation Center, Norco, Calif., 92860.*

## L.A. tries test to find kids likely to join gangs

By CHRISTINA HOAG (AP) – Aug 2, 2009

LOS ANGELES — Gang prevention cop Jeff Norat drives a bunch of sullen teens through the gang-riddled streets of a Los Angeles neighborhood, not because they're in trouble with the law — but so they'll stay out of it.

"These kids are all at risk of joining gangs — look where they live," said Norat, motoring through Boyle Heights where some gangs are in their third generation. "But some kids don't."

What prompts some kids to join gangs and their neighbors not to join is a question that has long baffled experts. City officials, who have made little headway denting the ranks of street gangs, now think they'll find the answer through a multiple-choice test.

"If you could identify who those at-risk kids were, then you could microtarget them with resources," said Jeff Carr, director of the mayor's office on gang reduction and youth development.

That premise marks a new strategy in the city's fight against gangs, which claim roughly 40,000 members in Los Angeles, making it the nation's gang capital.

The city spends about \$20 million a year on gang prevention and intervention. Until now, much of that funding has gone to what the anti-gang czar calls a "shotgun approach" to prevention — flooding gang-infested neighborhoods with social programs under the theory that any kid raised in these "hot zones" could wind up a tattooed gangbanger.

But Carr points to research showing only about 15 percent of kids in a given neighborhood join gangs, according to University of Southern California social psychologist Malcolm Klein and others. Klein found 10 factors that channel children into gangs, including poor parenting, justifying delinquent behavior and traumatic events.

Researchers at USC's Center for Research into Crime used those findings to develop the 74-question survey called the Youth Services Eligibility Test. A kid with at least five factors is deemed "at risk" and offered programs such as counseling, anger management, and tutoring.

Rather than reject a test that could stigmatize their kids, many struggling parents embrace it as a means to get their children much-needed help.

Frustrated mother Lorena Monzon was almost happy when her chronic-F daughter, Andrea, "failed" the test.

"I want something that's going to help her. Her grades are so low and her attitude is so bad," said Monzon, 29. "I'm afraid she'll get into drugs. She needs counseling."

Andrea, 12, said she likes the self-esteem enhancement programs she enrolled in. "It's pretty fun. It keeps me out of trouble," she said.

Gangs are always a risk in Boyle Heights, Monzon said. "I don't even want her to go out," she said. "There are so many gangsters around here."

On the eastern fringe of downtown LA, Boyle Heights is famed for its bright murals of Latino symbols like the Virgin of Guadalupe and pre-Columbian deity Quetzalcoatl, but it's also notorious as housing L.A.'s densest concentration of gangs.

After a gang prevention program at the Hollenbeck Police Activities League, LAPD's Norat takes the kids home. One lives a couple doors from a White Fence gang house. Two blocks later, in Evergreen turf, he drops off two brothers whose gangbanger dad was recently killed. Another boy gets out a street away from the house where a "shotcaller," or gang boss, lives.

The test found several of those kids at risk of joining a gang, but not others. Some critics say that's one problem with the test. In such a high-poverty, gang-saturated milieu, it excludes a lot of less-troubled kids who still need help. Fewer than a third of interviewed kids were identified as potential gang members.

"Any kid, if you're living in this environment surrounded by gangs, is going to be at risk," said Lorraine Garcia, Hollenbeck PAL program director.

Others suggest that kids ages 10 to 15 will tend to lie on a test that asks about drug use, parental abuse and criminal acts. Although kids are told answers are confidential, it's a lot to expect honest responses, said Jorja Leap, a gang expert at University of California, Los Angeles.

"These are kids who are afraid of arrest, afraid of being taken away from their parents," she said. "They've been schooled in not being truthful. It can take years to get their confidence."

Leap and others point to the low percentage of kids deemed at risk as a sign they're not being honest. Numbers should be higher because they were already singled out as troubled by teachers and counselors, they say.

USC's Karen Hennigan, director of the Center for Research into Crime who oversees the questionnaire scoring, said the test is a reasonable, data-supported approach and she believes kids are reasonably truthful.

Nevertheless, USC has advised case workers to build a rapport with youths by meeting with them before the interview. Agencies report that seems to be working. Hollenbeck PAL has seen the number of eligible kids triple from 15 percent to 45 percent since starting the new strategy in May.

No one knows if the test works. The city has contracted for a study in three years to see if kids the test failed to identify as gang-joiners went on to become homeboys.

"In some ways it's an experiment," Carr admitted. "But the gang problem has been endemic in LA for 25, 30 years. We have to innovate our way out of it."

# Gang Members Speak Out About Violence

## Current And Former Gang Members Give A Rare Look Into Their World

**[Jaclyn Allen](#), 7NEWS Reporter**

POSTED: 10:11 pm MDT May 18, 2007

**DENVER, Colo.** -- He is a hardened gang member, doing his share of what they call "dirt," or crimes ordered by gang leaders.

He's been shot at, stabbed, and he has the scars to prove it. But this gangster, who asked to remain anonymous, is only 16 years old.

"I guarantee you. I've lived through more stuff in 16 years than a 35-year-old man has lived through," the teen said. "Crazy things. And half these people think it's a joke. They're living in fair tale land. They ain't living in the real world like I am."

In the world of gangs, this high school junior said the color you wear and the signs you flash could get you killed.

He's a West Side Blood Piru, but what started for him as a place to belong when he was only 12 years old, has turned into a trap.

"Death is always there," he said. "There's always someone out there trying to smoke you, someone trying to pull out a gun on you, just because of the rag I wear. ... They make it seem like it's the best thing in the world, but what they don't tell you is the stuff you actually go through. The stuff you see every day."

After four years of crime, violence, drug-dealing and death, he is ready to get out.

But as former gang members will attest, it's not that simple.

"If you really want to get out, you have to fade out," said Cisco Gallardo with Gang Rescue and Support Project, or GRASP.

He helped found a gang in the 90s, but got out after serving time for dealing drugs. Now, he directs a program that helps kids get out. First, they have to slowly decrease the amount of time they spend with the gang, or "fade out."

He said gangs are on the rise, and often it takes something like Thursday night's double-shooting in Montview Park to wake up kids who want out.

"A lot of kids, they want help after an incident. Somebody gets shot. Like the friends of this person that was shot the other day," said Gallardo.

He believes gang violence is not much worse than it has been. What's different is the attention it is getting.

The Darrent Williams shooting put Denver's gang problem in the national spotlight, and community leaders are working to find solutions.

"If kids don't have alternatives, they're going to create their own," he said.

They are working on the so-called "Summer of Peace," programs for youth that encourage activities outside of gangs. He remembers the "Summer of Violence" in the 90s and doesn't want a repeat.

But for those already in gangs, like the 16-year-old so desperately looking for a way out, life outside of this world seems like a fairytale.

"When I go to church, I hear the pastor speaking the word of God. Then I'm like, damn, God don't want me doing this, but then again, God ain't here."

## **Former gang member changes direction of his life**



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As 2009 winds to a close, Sylvester LeBlanc has a lot to be thankful for.

He has a job as a Springfield autobody technician, one who by all accounts is dedicated and hard-working. He has a loving girlfriend and an almost-2-year-old son.

Go back 10 years, though, and the 34-year-old Chicago native's life was going nowhere.

A high school dropout, former gang member and criminal who spent several years behind bars after a slew of felony and misdemeanor convictions, LeBlanc knew he had to leave his lawless lifestyle.

"I grew up in Chicago, kind of a rough neighborhood with a lot of bad influences there," he said. "In Chicago, if you're in a rough neighborhood, you either join them or they're going to jump you every day. They kind of force you into it."

LeBlanc's mother, Delores LeBlanc of Chicago, said she knew her son was getting into trouble at school but wasn't sure why.

"He got kicked out of high school at 16, and I never knew what was going on because I was busy working and trying to provide for four children," she said. "I think the thing of it is that he realized himself that things were not going right."

LeBlanc said he went to prison three separate times, the first two times being paroled back to the neighborhood where he'd gotten into trouble before.

"I kind of burned my bridges at home. My mom was like, 'I don't want you to parole here because you keep doing the same stuff,'" he said. "I was involved in gangs, and it was the reason I wanted to get away. It heavily influenced my thinking, my everyday actions."

### **A new start in Springfield**

After his last stint behind bars, he chose to be paroled to Springfield.

When he arrived in August 2006, LeBlanc had nowhere to go. He lived at The Salvation Army shelter. He had no job, little history and no means of getting around the city when he called the local Workforce Investment Act office, the Illinois workNet Center, for training.

It was at the center, at 1300 S. Ninth St., that LeBlanc, against the odds, began to shine.

"The first time I met Sylvester, I had my doubts about whether he could finish the program," said Diane Cavanagh, who was LeBlanc's case manager. "When I first worked with him, I was a little skeptical because he had a lot of barriers and a lot of things he had to work on."

Cavanagh gave LeBlanc a list of things he needed to do.

"I expected to see him back in several weeks," she said. "I bumped into him the next day at the unemployment office, and he had finished all of them. At that point, I realized he was going to be very successful."

LeBlanc's plans went even further. He wasted no time enrolling at the Lawrence Education Center for math tutoring. Within six weeks, he jumped an entire grade level in his math score.

He started looking for an entry-level job near where he was living.

Then came the rejections.

“It was hard for him with the background he had,” Cavanagh said. “He had a pretty extensive criminal background. He was turned down over and over, but he didn’t give up. He’d be back the next day looking for jobs.”

### **Found his calling**

LeBlanc first found a part-time job at a fast-food restaurant. Shortly thereafter, he began working full time and enrolled in an autobody technician program at Lincoln Land Community College, taking a city bus to and from school and walking a mile or two home from work each night.

LeBlanc also met his now-girlfriend, Kameko Harper. Together, the couple has a 2-year-old son, Darrell.

When they first started dating, LeBlanc said, he couldn’t spend much time with Harper – he was too busy keeping up with work and his studies. That changed as his life’s pace became more consistent.

In August, he received his associate’s degree from LLCC. He now is an autobody technician for D’s Auto World.

“Things have slowed down,” he says, so he now has time to enjoy the blessings in his life.

LeBlanc says he spends most of his free time with Harper and their son.

“I think I really just wanted to make my family proud,” LeBlanc said. “I knew there was a better person inside of me, I just had to dig him up.”

His mother couldn’t agree more.

“He’s always been the type of person who believes the best in everybody else, and now he has to believe the best in himself also,” she said. “I think he made a conscious decision that he wanted more out of life than he was getting out of life. I’m really proud of him.”

### **‘Inspiration to everybody’**

Last month, LeBlanc was recognized for his work ethic when he won the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity’s Individual Achievement Award, an accolade given him for turning his life around.

Those who have seen him succeed along the way couldn’t be any prouder of LeBlanc.

"He really has made something of his life," said Anne Schneider, Land of Lincoln Workforce Alliance's executive director.

"His determination made him successful," Cavanagh said. "He's just an inspiration to everybody."

### **What are Illinois workNet Centers?**

Illinois workNet Centers provide one-stop services that link employers with qualified people seeking employment.

The Springfield center, 1300 S. Ninth St., provides services such as training, employment assistance, labor market information and financial support for employers and job seekers alike.

The Springfield workNet Center is one of the oldest and largest in Illinois. It opened in April 1995 and serves more than 18,000 people each year.

The Springfield workNet Center can be reached at 782-3846.

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