

PEACE IN THE STREETS

Breaking the Cycle of Gang Violence



ARTURO HERNANDEZ

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Child Welfare League of America
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I dedicate this book to my mother and father,
Ramona and Heladio Hernandez,
for their love, faith, and support without fail;
to the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian
Community, Arizona;
and to the boys and girls
of Clanton and Primera Flats, 1982.

Preface

The 12-year-old wore a white T-shirt and baggy gray work pants. He had cut them at the ankle a few inches so they made a tent over his black high tops. He was about two inches taller than five feet. I sat next to him in the seventh grade dean's office. The chairs were hard, of a dark wood, and had a train station feel to them. He couldn't get comfortable in one. I asked him, "So, what did you do?"

"Nothing. They want to kick me out." He was anxious.

"Is your mother coming?"

No answer.

"So, *qué pasa?** They bust you doing a *placaso*† on a teacher's butt or something?"

"It's fucked up. The dean says he found a screwdriver in my locker.‡ It's not mine."

"Where do you think they'll send you?"

"I don't know. Probably on the bus somewhere."

"You're gonna have to wake up early."

"I'm not gonna go. Fuck the school."

He went. I don't know how often, or if he went into the new school once he got off the yellow bus, but it was irrelevant. A

* What's up, what's happening?

† *Placaso* is gang lingo for one's name in graffiti. The word derives from *placa*, one's gang nickname, and the suffix *-aso*, which implies something akin to "on a grand scale."

‡ Screwdrivers are one way gang members try to get around weapons bans on campus.

couple of weeks after this conversation, he got on the bus, went to the valley, and, instead of going to class, walked over to the corner of a nice residential-commercial block. He waited until a car with local gang members drove by, then he raised his T-shirt and stuck out his belly, with its huge tattoo, "18th Street," across it. They exchanged a few words, the T-shirt stayed up, and the boys in the car took aim with the firearms he knew they would have and tore up his small torso in a few seconds.

This type of suicidal behavior is peculiar to America and, as we all know, is growing beyond our ghettos and consuming greater numbers of our children. I have worked with it for 20 years as a teacher, therapist, community activist, and youth minister. I have come to understand how kids learn to view life with such indifference.

What I am about to share with you is a story that took place in South Central Los Angeles, and, through this story, a difficult but realistic and permanent solution to our nation's gang problem. In 1982, I struck an agreement with the parents and teenagers of Clanton and Primera Flats, two of the oldest neighborhood gangs in East and South Central Los Angeles. The deal created a one-room schoolhouse, where I became the teacher of 30 gang members. The youngest student had recently turned 13; the oldest was almost 20. Both the gang members and their parents knew that I had no teaching credentials or college degree, that I had recently turned 22, and that the school would operate on only a few hundred dollars a month. But we had an idea that we believed in—an idea about what we could do as a neighborhood school raising neighborhood children. To that idea, we added some common sense, a lot of caring, and the help of friends and neighbors.

The gang members in this little school had long histories of truancy, violence, crime, and addiction. Yet for one year, not one student was arrested, was in danger of dropping out, or participated in lethal violence. Surprisingly, this result wasn't that hard to achieve.

I owe the lessons in the first half of this book to the members of the Clanton and Primera Flats gangs, who taught me how

much children want to be children, even when they are gang members. The gang members in this book are real people. Only their names have been changed to protect their identities and those of their families.

The second half of the book is based on my experience with gangs in a very different place—the Pima-Maricopa Indian Community on the Salt River Reservation, Arizona. Here, a small desert community struggles with a problem too similar to that in our urban centers. Yet that community's response differs radically from what I have seen in cities across the United States.

I owe the Pima-Maricopa Indian Community a debt for a profound lesson—one that completes the experience I began 20 years ago in South Central Los Angeles. On the Salt River Reservation, I have, for the first time, observed a community take collective responsibility for the problems of its youth. The vision they have adopted aims not only to contain gang violence but to do so in a way that shepherds back the community's most wayward children. The process I am witnessing on this American Indian reservation has inspired much of the advice I offer in the second half of this book.

My most ambitious hope is that this book will help move the dialogue on the gang problem away from one of a war on children to a constructive conversation in which, like the Pima, we sit as a community and decide instead how to heal our most difficult children.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The Beach Boys went to my high school. We moved into their neighborhood after the Watts riots, when African Americans, Caucasians, Latinos, Asian Americans—when everyone in the city—picked up and went somewhere else to be with their own kind. There was no trace of the Beach Boys left in Highland Park as brown folks cleared escrow and white folks packed themselves into station wagons and fled.

This created a new Mexican neighborhood, and I saw the first gang form on my street. First Hooknose, whose father fixed our cars, started ditching school along with Cantu, who lived two blocks down from me and would never open his mouth in class, even to go to the bathroom. The two always hid in the tunnel to scare elementary school kids, or took lunch money from students on their way to junior high.

In junior high school, this duo immediately met other young teens of similar circumstances—kids with nothing but time on their hands, who had trouble in school such that they cared little about poor report cards, homework, detention, or suspension. They had little to plan their days around except for the chores that mom needed done and the mischief they could conjure up.

Hooknose and Cantu had found a group like themselves to hang out with for ditching parties, access to drugs and alcohol, and general carousing. Soon, they were calling themselves the “Highland Park Gang” and writing “HLP” on local walls; stealing things; joyriding in stolen cars; and, pretty much for the

hell of it, getting into fights with similar groups in adjacent neighborhoods.

I knew all the HLP parents. Since ethnic groups tend to move together, most of their parents immigrated from the same cluster of villages as my parents. None of the parents were gang members, and most of the families were Catholic, two-parent households. Some were better parents than others, but that's true of any group.

When the gang formed, it wasn't with the intention of becoming a "gang." This bunch of kids hung out together because they had things in common, including a dislike of school. Of course, they also had no intention of becoming addicts or ending up in jail or ruining their lives. But 14-year-olds don't think that far ahead. It sort of snuck up on them.

I was never invited to become part of this group, even though I knew them all. I didn't like the khakis they wore, the '50s oldies they listened to, being high all the time, or spending my days at the park just bullshitting. I did like Paul Simon, playing the guitar, and reading. The new *cholos** had plenty of adventures I enjoyed hearing about; but I had my own adventures, and the price for their kind exceeded my desire to participate.

No one ever got forced in. Kids, like all people, want to hang out with others whose company they enjoy. When someone got jumped into the gang it was because both sides were looking forward to it.

My brother, my best friend, and I were the only kids on the block who didn't participate in anything more than porch banter with our local "gang." My brother entertained himself by practicing martial arts, which eventually led him to an acting career. My best friend and I got busy becoming musicians. Those interests gave us long-term peer groups, goals, and a daily occupation. But each of us came to these pursuits by pure chance. My brother because he befriended some Korean students and became fascinated with Bruce Lee films; myself

* Gang members.

because I suffered a leg disease, which kept me at home most of the time; and my best friend because he learned guitar after I taught him some chords and gave him my sheet music.

What did the parents of the HLP gang try on their behalf? Just about everything they knew to do. They punished their kids, talked to them, locked them in the house. None of these approaches were very effective. Sending them to Mexico proved worthwhile when possible. A 14-year-old who did not succeed in school simply joined the work force in Mexico.

This is not an argument for child labor, but we should be aware that there is no plan B in this country when plan A fails. We don't know how to make school work for all kids, especially minority kids, and we don't provide alternatives. If a kid is not in school and doesn't have anything of particular importance to take the place of school, the only thing left is mischief.

I learned a bit more about gangs in the seventh grade.

I naively took electric shop, and I took it seriously, reading books and trying to build crystal radios. This annoyed my shop teacher, who liked to teach students to build wooden light boxes that required a minimal explanation of electricity. Shop teachers spend their days with the students no one else wants and who can't pass anything else.

Once a week, the teacher gave a quiz based on our shop textbook. It may have been a requirement of the school district, or maybe one of his conscience. Few students came to class on that day, and those who did waged war the whole period. I don't remember any student capable of reading through the shop textbook except for myself. The teacher hated reading day, the other students hated it, and I hated it.

Sometimes, the older gang members in class would take my pocket change, but not too often. Over time, a distant respect arose between us, and an understanding on my part. These were loser kids. There was no other way to put it. They had no business being in a school that did nothing but shame them. I could not imagine one of these guys taking home a history or algebra book, working through the chapter, and coming to class the next day with work neat and complete. Over the course of

the year, some stopped coming to school, others provoked expulsions, and a few finished the year in juvenile hall. I watched them drift off one at a time, week after week.

This moved me. I had spent my junior high years trying to compensate for a physical handicap that kept me separate from the activities of my friends. I understood the pain of wanting to be something besides what I was. A similar sentiment existed among the gang members with whom I interacted daily. They constantly chided each other over who was the worst failure, and although it was funny, it was also hard. "I'm not going to live to be 20, so who cares?" This sentence inevitably came up as the last defense of failure, addiction, or some destructive act whenever gang members argued.

Through music, I found a bridge to acceptance, a place in the world. But what provided this bridge for the gang members I talked with in shop class? Drugs, fighting, acting crazy? Such activities gave them status with each other, but the world outside their group remained unimpressed, and they couldn't ignore this. I remember standing next to Wizard. We were soldering wires on a circuit board. He told me: "I want to join the Marines. I always think about that man in a black suit coming to my mom's house and telling her I died in a war, for my country, you know? That would be the first time my mom would ever be proud of me."

My mother made a point of picking up every injured pigeon, dog, or neighbor's child and bringing it home. She taught us not to ignore the suffering of others. As soon as I could drive, I asked my pastor, Father Greenly, if he would allow me to work on the juvenile hall visitation team. What I learned in the detention facility rounded out the lessons of the electric shop.

In detention, the inmates became both sorry and motivated. Incarceration had the desired effect: It made them reconsider their situations and kindled in them intentions to do better. But once they were released, their resolutions met the resistance of old habits, old friends, inexperience, and inability. For the next two years, I tried an experiment at my church that I thought might help gang members hold onto their better convictions.

Father Greenly helped me organize a team of adult and teen volunteers. From the pulpit, he asked if families in the parish would be willing to mentor the neighborhood boys and girls who would soon be released from incarceration. This mentorship would be an aid to the parents of these inmates—a second family, or *compadres*, as we say in Spanish. Teenagers usually prefer adult advice to be delivered by someone other than their own parents.

The teens who volunteered served as a peer support group—friends to get the released gang members involved in church activities, sports, and other salubrious pursuits. Both teen and adult volunteers tutored students and generally encouraged school success. Our experiment was brief. After one year, I discontinued it when college demands forced a choice between volunteer activities and passing classes. But one year proved enough time to succeed with a few kids. The cost? Plenty, in terms of time, labor, and patience. At no point, however, did it take genius on our part—only unwavering constancy and high-octane energy.

This experience clarified for me that gang-involved kids needed an adult world—not just their parents, but a whole community of adults. Together, we could teach them not only what wrongs to avoid but also what they were supposed to be doing right. More than lecturing, gang-involved teens needed to learn how to read, do homework, stay sober, play a guitar, or apply for a job. They needed strong supervision to keep them from straying, and lots of rewards to keep them going.

And they needed time. The community could not give up on them after a few months or because a single program didn't straighten them out. Shortcuts didn't exist in this arena. Unfortunately, one year could only begin a process. These kids still had lots of growing up to do, and they needed special help with it the whole way through. As good as I felt about what we accomplished, I dismantled the program knowing that we left these kids without the railing that they still needed to hold onto.

About four years later, just after I turned 21, I took a position as an aide at Adams Junior High School in South Central Los