



R.W. Dellinger

June 28, 2019

For an hour on a recent Tuesday afternoon, a Dodge Journey S.U.V. crisscrossed the territories of Tiny Boys, Big Hazard, State Street, Gage Maravilla, White Fence and other local gangs in Boyle Heights, a dense neighborhood east of downtown Los Angeles. Johnny Torres, the driver, has been a paid gang intervention worker in the area for more than a dozen years, and a volunteer interventionist for 10 years before that.

He pointed out how compact and dense the area really was. One side of a street could belong to one gang, the other to another. He explained the difference between relatively new tagging “crews” and established gangs that go back generations. The crews began in the 1980s in Los Angeles as small, haphazard groups who just wanted to lay down graffiti on walls, signs and any other clean surface they could find, but now they are connected to gangs as a kind of minor league. If somebody in a crew stood out, especially if they had done enough violent work for the gang, they just might be invited to join.

The initiation is not pretty. New members have to be “jumped in,” usually a 13-second beating at the hands of a couple of card-carrying members. In Mr. Torres’s day, the neophyte would be punched and kicked until some tired gang member relented, saying, “Hey, that’s enough.”

But there was a big exception to the crew-gang street relationship. In the early 1990s, KAM, or “Krazy Ass Mexicans,” did the unheard-of in Boyle Heights.

“They started out as a simple tagging crew that nobody thought anything about,” Mr. Torres said, slowing the S.U.V. down a notch. “But right where we are now, two old established gangs, Ficket Street and Vicky’s Town, tried to pressure the crew to join their gangs. But the nondescript group fought back. Amazingly, KAM eventually pushed out both steadfast gangs, taking over the whole neighborhood—something Boyle Heights had never experienced before.”

Today, they are one of the most aggressive gangs on the Eastside of Los Angeles. The violence never really died down. KAM has had to continually defend its turf from older gangs like Big Hazard, State Street and Gage Maravilla, but the Krazy Ass Mexicans held their ground.

“They started out as a simple tagging crew that nobody thought anything about.”

“They’re surrounded by enemies, but they maintain their territory. And they have a huge territory. The big guys didn’t anticipate they’d fight back. But that’s what they did. They were—and still are—well-structured and smart,” said Mr. Torres, sitting

back behind the wheel.

[Want to discuss politics with other America readers? Join our Facebook discussion group, moderated by America's writers and editors.]

He was shaking his head and smiling a little, too. “It’s amazing to imagine the minds of these young KAM people,” he said. “Imagine what it would have been like if they would have put their efforts toward something positive. I mean, to orchestrate what they did, they had to have the strategy of a four star general. And [most are only] 13 to 18 years old. It’s amazing. The gangs kept thinking they would easily be able to strongarm the tagging crews. But they were wrong.”

We had crossed over the San Bernardino Freeway and were approaching what looked like a separate city, with more than 100 two-story, pinkish-brown buildings scattered across 32 acres. The first six families moved into what was then called Ramona Village on Jan. 2, 1941. This afternoon, kids were running around, trying to keep on the grass and off the hardpan of their small, sun-bleached front yards. We passed a woman sitting on her front steps, watching a little boy and girl throwing a beach ball back and forth. But mostly folks were staying inside on the hot July day.

The Dodge Journey was just nudging along, the driver keeping one hand on the steering wheel, glancing around at his old stomping grounds, what is now called Romana Gardens. Mr. Torres had worked in gang intervention for the City of Los Angeles’s Gang Reduction and Youth Development program, working mostly with Big Hazard bangers for more than a decade. The gang was one of the oldest in L.A. and connected to the Mexican Mafia inside California’s prisons. One of their major enterprises was selling drugs—PCP in the 1970s, and currently pharmaceuticals like Xanax.

Pulling over to a curb, Mr. Torres observed, “You put dope and guns and self-hate in the same place, and we get what we get.”

Ministering to Gangs



The Rev. Stan Bosch, a Trinitarian priest and a psychotherapist, believes those who join gangs are often traumatized at an early age, even in the womb. Father Bosch is seen here with Noah, a golden retriever he was training to be a therapy dog. (Victor Alemán)

Around 10 years ago, Stan Bosch, a Trinitarian priest, encouraged Johnny Torres to become a paid G.R.Y.D. gang intervention worker. Ever since he became familiar with gangs as pastor of Our Lady of Victory and Sagrado Corazon Catholic churches in Compton, Calif., even before he earned his Ph.D. in psychotherapy, Father Bosch believed he had figured out why they bang.

“I’m more and more convinced that the root is ‘complex trauma,’ which is different from even the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that so many veterans of wars come home

with. It’s more developmental. From the womb to the grave, people in the inner city are being traumatized. Listening to screams, beatings and sirens. There is more and more evidence that a fetus is harmed. The hormonal structure. The emotional structure. The entire development can be altered,” Father Bosch said.

“The therapeutic healing process for me is allowing people to create a space between their perception, their emotions and their actions.”

“It really influences one’s development,” he said. “And the symptomology that comes out of that is dissociated states and depersonalization: ‘It wasn’t me! I don’t take responsibility for my life.’ And there’s lack of impulse control.”

In hundreds of hours of therapy with “tag-bangers” and gang members, Father Bosch learned about a condition called alexithymia, which is often characterized by failures of emotional awareness, social attachment and interpersonal relating. The

youths and young adults he was working with could not use words to describe their ongoing troubled feelings. Instead, they acted out, in many cases violently.

“So, the therapeutic healing process for me is allowing people to create a space between their perception, their emotions and their actions. And simply to reflect on what’s going on inside—and find words for those affective states,” he said, shooing away his golden retriever Noah from biting a visitor’s camera bag. He was training the young, nipping canine to be his next therapy dog.

“I find group therapy is more powerful than individual,” Father Bosch went on. “If somebody starts talking about what they feel, it might get others to share their feelings, too. I had warring gang members in the same groups in Long Beach and Compton. They said, ‘You know, we can’t ever talk to each other outside of this group. But here it’s sacred because it’s confidential. And we trust you.’”

A Long Road

Johnny Torres said being able to really trust somebody was a big step in leaving his own gangbanging life. The 47-year-old man grew up in East L.A. When he was a kid, there were no tag-banging crews, and most of the guys in his neighborhood were violently “jumped into” gangs before they reached 14. But so much of his own adolescence was taken up creating all kinds of graphic art, he did not get around to joining the local gang until the ripe old age of 17 in 1988.



Johnny Torres, who used to be a member of a gang, has worked in gang intervention in Los Angeles for more than 20 years. (Victor Alemán)

“I resisted for a long time,” he said. “But then I couldn’t, because everybody belonged to some gang where I lived. And I was harassed by the cops, who thought I was a gang member even though I wasn’t. I’d also be harassed by other gangs that weren’t from the area. And so eventually I started to believe I might

as well submit and become part of the gang. And I started believing what they believed: ‘This is all I am. I can’t be something greater.’ You know, I just accepted that lie.”

That mindset stuck with him until he was 24.

When do we stop being lost in our own self-pity and self-hate and fight to regain our spirit and our mind back again?

“It was October of 1994,” Mr. Torres recalled. “And a great person, an elder within the Native American tradition, took an interest in me and gave me some beautiful teachings. He gave me a divine truth that just really put me on my journey of changing my life.”

The elder told him, “When do we honor our ancestors? When do we re-establish our positions as caregivers of this earth again? When do we stop being lost in our own self-pity and self-hate and fight to regain our spirit and our mind back again? Or will it be up to the little children to fight and fend for themselves? Will they have to fight the good fight? Because the generation of their parents were too weak to fight for them and their people?”

Those words sent him on a path of finding his true self, Mr. Torres said. He wanted to “defend the lives of our children and preserve the sacred lives of our youth—especially the youth that seem neglected and forgotten.”

Once, he went to a funeral of a close friend with his mother. His friend had committed suicide while she was eight months pregnant. It hit the whole community, including him, hard. Nobody he knew had ever committed suicide, never mind a friend who was pregnant.

“You’re not growing old with any of your friends,” his mother told him at the time. It was true. His gangbanging circle of homeboys kept getting killed or going to prison on a regular basis.

After trying a variety of jobs and volunteering to mediate local gang disturbances, Mr. Torres wound up working for Soledad Enrichment Action at its alternate school site in South Los Angeles for teenagers who had been expelled from their junior highs or high schools. First, he was an outdoor security guard trying to keep rival gang members from fighting in the schoolyard, and also a teaching assistant in classrooms. After a year, Father Bosch, the program's mental health director, encouraged him to apply to G.R.Y.D., the City of Los Angeles's newest antigang effort. He got the job, working in the Ramona Gardens area of Boyle Heights. After a few other assignments, he wound up as program coordinator for the entire region.

Late last year, he created a similar program for the County of Los Angeles. Since then, he has been focused on diverting juveniles and young adults from becoming ensnared in city, county and state justice and correctional systems.

Still Tag-Banging

Joseph Meza, a former client of Mr. Torres from when he was working for G.R.Y.D., admitted still belonging to a tag-banging crew. But he insisted they were way more artistic than the average tag-bang crew, with font styles and their overall meticulousness. They did not just go out on the street, scribble down some graffiti and take off. Instead, they carefully planned out what they did, and where and when they did it.

"You can say I'm a tag-banger," he told me. "But I'm more of a graphic artist, honestly. I'm very hood-smart and streetwise. I look gangster-wise, but I never really got into it, although I came close. Real close! I'm more careful now. I was hanging out with a bunch of other guys from different gangs. It was just the crowd I was hanging with that got me into a lot of trouble."

Mr. Meza said that in his teenage years he was in and out of juvenile hall, probation camps and placements in foster care. In fact, he was 16 years old and in detention when his father was deported back to Mexico eight years ago, and he has not seen him since. His mother was not around much either.

“My daughter’s three months old. Her name is Layla. So I have to think about the consequences for her if I get caught and go to jail again.”

“I went through all the juvenile stuff,” he said. “They actually gave me a year and nine months in [California’s] Youth Authority for my crime. But I ended up doing seven months in placement. Boys Republic in Chino Hills, [a private, nonprofit school and treatment community for troubled youths], was like a big farm. It was pretty open, and you could just run away. But if you did, you would get caught, because the police station is down the street.”

The 24-year-old met Mr. Torres when he was just 13 because of G.R.Y.D. He remembered the gang intervention worker telling him that if his art improved, he could get paid for it and maybe even get a steady gig in advertising. That was something far beyond what he had ever imagined. Then at Camp Tagger—a weekend mountain art retreat Mr. Torres helps organize—he learned about the history of graffiti, the laws covering it and what you would be charged with for doing it. Several famous muralists also showed up at the camp and introduced themselves.

“Just recently I slowed down, because I have a baby girl,” Mr. Meza said. “My daughter’s three months old. Her name is Layla. So I have to think about the consequences for her if I get caught and go to jail again. I’ve calmed down. Before I just thought about myself. I didn’t care what I did. I could steal. I could do all kinds of stupid stuff. Now I have to think about, you know, another human being.”

The Father Wound

Father Bosch said another way to get inside the heads of gang members was to look at the early childhood loss they had suffered—a simple insight that worked time and time again. Often the father was missing from the family. This “father wound” took its toll. He believed if a therapist could get to this trauma and pain, healing could happen.

He steeped all of Soledad Enrichment Action's intervention workers in a kinder, more personable way of dealing with their clients, a 180-degree shift from the popular intervention tactics of the 1950s and '60s, when at-risk teenagers were taken into the worst ward of a prison in hopes they would be "scared straight."

"I believe a longing to belong is ultimately the issue."

Father Bosch said Angelenos have a hard time understanding the concept of "payback." On top of that, given that most East L.A. and Boyle Heights Hispanic gang members had Catholic backgrounds, the priest blames the church for not getting across Jesus' message of reconciliation. Instead, his young clients had been mentored by violent gangs.

"I believe a longing to belong is ultimately the issue," Father Bosch said. "With the taggers writing on the walls, I've had fellas who say, 'I want them to see me up there. I want to be recognized, especially by my homies.'"

That, in part, helps explain why members often struggle to leave the gang.

"I give my blood. They're my homies. It's for life' is how they put it," he explained. "But when there's a glimmer of hope is when fellas start to have their own babies. And they say, 'Do I want this for my child?' Or when they just get sick and tired of being sick and tired. Or the pain gets so deep that they have a spiritual transformation while locked up."

After a moment, however, he added in a more downbeat voice, "Once you're in it, it's kind of hard to really leave that life. But we keep trying as interventionists. And sometimes they do put all that behind them."

A Mother's Nightmare

Kathy Wooten's sons did not. On Jan. 27, 2008, her oldest son, Brandon, 26, was shot and killed at a party in Florence, south of Los Angeles. She knew he belonged to Grape Street, a notorious gang. After his death, the retaliation took more young lives. And 52 days later, on March 19, her second oldest son, Keyuan, 24—home on

spring break from the University of Nebraska—went roller skating in Cerritos in Orange County, south of Los Angeles. Members of a rival gang shot him. He died at Long Beach Memorial Hospital later that evening.

“As a result of that, of course, my life will never be the same,” she said from behind a desk at S.E.A.’s South Los Angeles site, a few doors away from Father Bosch’s office. “And now I’m raising Keyuan’s 15-year-old son. And that’s how I got into the intervention and victims’ advocate work that I do. My life is my work, and my work is my life. I’m on call 24/7.”

On the other side of the converted classroom, the case manager Barbara Gell was behind another desk. The 53-year-old woman also lost a son to gang violence. It happened 20 years ago, but she still felt an emptiness in her life.

“When you’re young, you’re bulletproof in your brain.”

Both mothers harbored feelings of guilt they said would not go away.

“I could have done something differently to keep my son from getting killed. I could have made my son get back in the car and go home,” said Ms. Gell. “It took me about three years to get over a lot of the guilt I had. But it’s still not all gone.”

Ms. Wooten was nodding across the room. “And I could have told my eldest son not to go to that party because I was just with him,” she said. “I could have just said ‘No!’ And it was on my mind to say it. But I didn’t.”

“And that’s where the guilt came from,” said Ms. Gell, who also knew her son was gangbanging. “Because I knew something was going to be wrong. I’m telling his dad, right, ‘I don’t think we should leave him here,’ dropping him off at a friend’s house with a lot of guys all outside. And he was like, ‘Oh, no. He’ll be all right.’”

But there was only so much inner-city parents could do to protect their children. At some point, their children made up their own minds. And the call of the streets was hard to resist.

“When you’re young, you’re bulletproof in your brain,” quipped Ms. Gell.

Her co-worker’s expression changed: “They never imagine it’s going to happen to them.”

There was more talk about the sons they had lost, and how their sons were basically good human beings. Then Ms. Wooten sat up in her chair. “I do what I do because I don’t want their lives to be in vain,” she said. Ms. Gell nodded. “And I don’t want people to think, ‘They were just old gang members.’ Because they were more than that.”

This article also appeared in print, under the headline “A complex trauma: Understanding the wounded psyche of gang members,” in the July 8, 2019, issue.

More: [LATINO](#) / [CRIMINAL JUSTICE](#)