

Life Facing Bars: A film documentary

A Senior Project

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Introduction

In Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties, gang members are recruiting junior high school students to join local gangs. Many of these kids are from troubled homes and are missing positive role models and adequate supervision. “Research suggests that youth join gangs to feel accepted, attain status, and increase their self-esteem. Students who are more vulnerable to the lure of gangs may feel disenfranchised or threatened, have poor school connection, have troubled family relationships, have siblings or friends who are in gangs, or be looking for fun and excitement.” (Pesce et. al, 4)

A couple of months ago, I was approached by Sergeant Dan Cohen of the Santa Maria Police Department to help him film testimonies of ex-gang members. He saw my work during my internship at Mountainbrook Church and the video eventually became my senior project. Since then, I signed a 5-month contract in partnership with the city of Santa Maria, the police department, and the YMCA, and sponsored by the Santa Barbara foundation. The initial goal changed from video testimonials of ex-gang members to a 30-minute video documentary focused on reaching junior high school kids before they get jumped into gangs. The finished product of this senior project consists of a produced three-minute video to serve as a preview of the documentary.

There are three main points we want to present in this documentary. The first point is to uncover the lies the gang members use to manipulate and brainwash kids to join the gang lifestyle. The second point is to drive home the harsh reality of the gang lifestyle and the serious consequences of their actions. Lastly, we want to give the kids practical ways they can avoid the lifestyle and get involved in more positive activities.

The mirage of gang life, as told by former gang members

Our most powerful testimonials come from gang dropouts serving large sentences in state prison and county jail. Most of these men were once hardened criminals, but can relate to the tactics of gang recruitment. These men we interviewed are all in protective custody, because when they dropped out of the gang, active gang members targeted them for violent retribution. One of the biggest rules for gang members is to never rat your homies out. “Being a rat is the lowest form any gang member can stoop down to, but when you’re facing a life sentence, you begin to rethink things,” Sergeant Cohen said. All the ex-gang members we interviewed had different reasons for dropping out, but they all have very similar stories of the lies of gang life.

Junior high students are forced to make decisions that will impact the rest of their lives. “At 12 and 13 years old, youths are desperate for peer approval and are a virtual sponge to outside influences,” (Yale, 9). “A report by the U.S. Department of Education and the Department of Justice found that 37% of students surveyed in 1995 indicated that there was a gang presence in their schools.” In Santa Maria, although only 16 percent of all crimes in 2008-2009 were attributed to gangs (KCOY, 11), they commit the majority of the violent crimes and a third of the homicides and manslaughters. According to the civil grand jury, there are at least six identified gangs with a membership of at least 900 in the Santa Maria area (KCOY, 11). Most Santa Maria gang members are in their teens or early 20s. An alarming trend is the recruitment of children in junior high school (Pesce et. al, 4). Kids as young as 10 are getting “jumped in,” or joining a gang by getting beat up. Many of these kids have friends and family members involved in gangs. Many lack positive male role models or adequate supervision and fall into the wrong crowds. Kids

are told glamorized versions of the gang lifestyle by older peers, and find an appeal in protection from bullying, attention from girls, and respect from their peers. “A sense of belonging’s huge,” said one of the officers. “Especially when they start aligning themselves with this really large group that they admire, they respect, or that everyone else is afraid of. And now they’re hanging out with them, and so now there’s that sense of being somebody (Yale, 9).

The two main ways that junior high school kids are being introduced into the gangs are peer influence and family involvement. Ronald “Disciple” Claborn, was a part of the Nipas gang in Nipomo. He was jumped into the gang at age 12 through peer influence. He was facing life in prison for carjacking, extortion, and home invasion robbery, with gang enhancements, participation in a criminal street gang, for the further enhancement of a street gang before he dropped out of the gang. His dad passed away when he was 11 and his mom was a government contractor and worked out of town six days a week. His step-dad was Jesse “Tinker” Maldonado of the Nipas gang. So with his mother gone all the time and being around Maldonado and his homies and their kids, Claborn became influenced by his step-dad and hung out with the wrong crowd. Cohen asked Claborn about how he joined Nipas.

Cohen: What attracted you most to gangs?

Claborn: I just seen everybody around me had nice clothes, had money, everybody looked at them like they were cool. They had respect. You know I wanted people to look at my like that. I wanted to have nice clothes and nice cars, have all the girls fighting over me. It was cool, who wouldn’t want that?”

Cohen: Did you get jumped in? How old were you? Tell me about that process?

Claborn: I was 12 when I got jumped in. Me, my brother Bertie, South Santana, my homeboy Rascal, my homeboy Nasty, Ricardo Orozco, we're all kicking it in, what's called the Jungle Hop, it's a two-story tree house right there on Southland Street in Nipomo. We're like 12 years old, they're a little older than me, we're all drinking, everybody's talking about what they did for the neighborhood and everything. I was like 12 so like, what did I really have to contribute? So the question came in, if something were to happen, would I be down for everybody. So right there I jumped up like, "What you think I'm a pussy? You know, what's up?" "I mean, what do you guys want to do?" They were like, "You want to get popped into the hood or what?" "Let's go out in the street." So we all went out in the middle of the street and I started getting them up. And when we were done, you know what I mean, they all gave me hugs, we went in the Jungle Hop, popped a beer. "You know what I mean, that's right little homie from the hood now." (2)

Adam "Boo Boo" Ybarra was from the West Side gang in Lompoc. He is facing 30+ years for firearms possession, bulletproof vest, and possession of methamphetamines with the gang enhancement. He's serving time in Santa Barbara County jail and is fighting three different cases against him. Ybarra wasn't jumped into the gang, but got involved through family involvement. (6)

Cohen: Now you said you were a third-generation gang member. Was your dad a gang member?

Ybarra: My mom. My mom's mom. My grandpa. Me. Trying to cut the cycle, you know what I mean? I don't want my kids to go through that. So yeah, third-generation drug user, third-generation gang member, my grandpa is one of the founders of VLP [West Side VLP – Lompoc gang], you know what I mean? So it's only natural that I fall into it.

(6)

Manipulation and brainwashing are key tools to enslaving kids into the gang lifestyle. Arthur "Brownie" Nevarez is a 37-year-old former East Side Familia gang member from Santa Barbara. He is currently serving a life sentence under California's Three-Strikes Law. He got a strike for stabbing a rival gang member and another one for robbery. He got his third strike for striking his wife with a pistol. He's in Santa Barbara County Jail as the result of another prosecution for torture and false imprisonment. (3)

Cohen: What did it mean to be a gang member before and now how do you feel about it.

Arthur Nevarez: It's like I stepped outside of myself. I felt like this before, and the only time I felt like this was when I was in front of my children - when I was with my children as a dad. But now this episode happened, and I'm looking at myself, it's like I'm beside myself. I don't recognize the reason, the logic, of what was going through my mind at the time. It's just, very cult-like, very brainwashed – I guess that's the perfect word for it. (3)

Cohen: What would you say to kids? Maybe a warning about how they may get recruited or lured in, the lies gangs might use to draw them in, and what's the reality and truth?

Claborn: The reason it works, the reason that they draw you in, is because the people who are telling it to you, they don't think they're lying. In their heads, everything that they're telling you is true to them. At that age in your life you need something to believe in, you know? You need a cause in life. You need to think about, "What do I want to do in life? What do I want to be when I grow up? What do I want to do?" You know, you see these people they've got money, they've got cars, you know, you hear the music, "Rolling down the street in my nine," and you know, you think that's the cool thing to do, that's the cool thing to be, but in reality, all it does is put you where I am, or dead. (2)

As gang members correlate their struggles and fight for the "Cause" with the idea of soldiers in war, the idea of camaraderie and loyalty between homies is an attractive draw for kids looking for acceptance, love, and brotherhood.

Sergeant Cohen: Tell me about loyalty in the gang.

Nevarez: Loyalty is non-existent in the gang, but active gang members will tell you otherwise. Active gang members, who play the political game within the gang, use the word loyalty. And what it does, especially to the young kids, is when you here the word loyalty, it's attractive, it's something that you wouldn't expect to hear from a criminal. So when a person that's violent, does drugs, and lacks respect amongst regular society, uses words such as loyalty - then these kids feel really attracted, to this lifestyle. "Oh wait a minute, there's loyalty here" – but there's not. You can grow up with somebody, you can go to school with this person, the person can be your family, if the gang tells you that this person has to go, the first person that is going to be asked is you. So they're

compromising the loyalty between two friends, or two family members, and the moment that you decide that you don't want to do that, then the loyalty between them and yourself is gone. So the truth is that loyalty within a gang world is just a word. It's a carrot on a stick. (3)

These men have a lot of time to think about their situation and the things they've done in the past. Cohen asked them what they think about gangs now that they're no longer a part of them.

Cohen: To the kids out there that want to go to jail, they want to earn that badge of honor, they want that reputation, they want the girlfriends – they think there's money, that's kind of the lure to some kids to get them in the gang. What would you tell the kids about, here are the lies you are told, but here's the truth.

Ybarra: What I would tell kids who want to be a gang member, and they see all the money and the girls and the fame - it's all a mirage. You know? Your homies don't really care about you. When you're in jail and you're sitting in there with nothing – no soap, no hygiene, no deodorant, not even some toothpaste to brush your teeth – your homies are out there loving it, kicking it with your girlfriend, you know what I mean? It all hits you - it's all a mirage, it's fake. They don't really love you, your family loves you, they're the only ones who are going to be there when it's all said and done, you know? Your homies, it can be your best homie that you grew up with as a kid, he'll be the first one to jump on your girl, as soon as you're gone. (6)

Cohen: So the next thing I'll ask is, what's the worst part about being involved in gangs?

Claborn: What's the worst part? Being left out to dry. Being hung out to dry by everybody. You know, I got shot, one of my best friends died in my arms. When I came to jail, you know, I'm on the bus telling everybody, you know – "These guys did a drive by. I mean since when are we allowed to do drive-bys? Since when is that cool? You know what I mean? What are you guys gonna do? Let these fools stay on the line? You guys ain't gonna do nothing about this?" You know, I can't do nothing about this, I'm in iso, you know what I mean? And, "Oh, yeah we got you dog, don't trip." But then next time I go to court and next time I see them, everybody's all hanging out together. I felt like, you know what I mean? The person who died wasn't even from my neighborhood, he was from their neighborhood, you know what I mean? So I mean it was like, where's the, "I'm down for you, I got you don't worry," you know what I mean? "I'll die for you, I'll ride for you. If you die, I'll ride for you," you know what I mean? Where is that? Where did it go? I feel like, the loyalty, was gone. It was every man for themselves. I didn't have nothing to offer them, so I was no longer a part of the picture. (2)

Consequences of actions

Sergeant Cohen said that Santa Maria prosecutors hand out life and maximum sentences like candy, and the city is seeing an increase in gang dropouts in hopes for lowered sentences. Isaiah "Cholo" Arroyo is a 20-year-old ex-gang member from the Northwest gang in Santa Maria. He was facing 17 years for stealing a bag of chips from a parked taco truck and beating up the owner after he pulled off his shirt to display his "PROJECTS" gang tattoo on his chest.

Sergeant Cohen: You got in trouble for a bag of chips. What happened?

Arroyo: On the case that I'm here for now, me and my three co-defendants, all three of them from my neighborhood all three of them were jumped in and one day we were just drunk we were walking from one of the homie's pads and one of us decides that he wants to steal off the taco truck that's always open. So we do it, we're drunk, not thinking about the consequences, not thinking about anything – not thinking about what happens if we get caught. And really thinking that it's no big deal. We all start stealing stuff off the truck and we're so drunk that we don't even realize that we're being loud, so the owners come out and we all start getting crazy with them. I take off my shirt; I got a big tattoo across my chest that says "PROJECTS", so automatically they're identifying me because of that. And we get into it with them and start throwing a couple punches. In the end, we get caught. The cops come and we all get arrested. I think because I'm on probation, I'm not going to get in trouble. But couple weeks later, I find out that I'm facing a lot of time. I'm looking at 17 years at the worst, for a bag of chips. All because I wanted to be kicking it with my homies and get drunk. (1)

Cohen: What have you sacrificed being in a gang?

Claborn: I look at everything now like, what was I thinking? Look where I am? Look what I've been through and for what? In the end, all it comes down to, what do I have? I got three kids who hardly know me. I got a wife right now who's on the verge of leaving me. How can I expect her to go through this? They didn't do anything wrong, what did my kids do wrong? What did my kids do to not deserve a father? What did they do to deserve to be by themselves, you know? What did my wife do to have me not be there for

her, like she doesn't need help? You know, now I'm sitting here. You know, yeah I try to put on my smiles everyday and make it through but every night I go to sleep hoping like, man, if I didn't wake up in the morning sometimes, like wouldn't that just be better for everybody else? I feel like I'm such a burden on everybody else. I'd just be better if I wasn't even around, like I look back and think about all the stupid shit that I've done and all the stupid things that I've been through. Like what was it all really for? My homies? This false sense of camaraderie that never really existed in the first place, yeah when you're a kid you have friends. You know what, I still have some of those friends, I do. But the whole thing is, they were involved in gangs when we were that age, we all were, but now they're out of it. They've got jobs and they're professionals and you know they're doing something with their lives, they're not here where I am. You know what I mean? I just beat life in prison. I mean, how many people can say that? (2)

Cohen: Was it worth it?

Nevarez: No, no it wasn't.

Cohen: Tell me about that?

Nevarez: I have, I have children. When I left this last time, my oldest – my son, was four, my twins were three – I've missed out on everything. Even waking up with them in the same bed. So, on my behalf, my life is worth something to me, not only did I miss out on that, but I deprived my children of myself, and of what possibilities I had to offer to them. (3)

Cohen: Now that you're separating yourself from that world, what would you say about that mindset of, "I'm willing to hurt people for reputation," what would you say about that?

Arroyo: Now that I'm on this side, now that I changed everything, my whole perspective to life and everything – I see that all that was an illusion and there's no respect. In the end, the whole lifestyle, you just get used, and it's just a waste of time and there's no point in it. That's how I see it. (1)

As we can see from these testimonies, the gang lifestyle isn't all that it's been cut up to be. Through the lens of these ex-gang members who have witnessed it all firsthand, they've escaped the brainwashing. They see the futility of progressing in something so pointless as the gang life. These men have hurt and killed people for respect, commitment, and tattoos. They've desired to build to their respect through prison and jail terms and violence. But when the ultimate end of the lifestyle is either life in prison or death, these men needed to face reality and make a decision to scrap whatever they could of their lives.

Guilty by Association

Kids can look at these hardcore gang members and think that they'll never "be that hard." Kids don't think that they will ever do something like commit murder. The strict gang laws in California allow for cities like Santa Maria to prosecute all defendants for a crime just by association. Dan told me a story about a couple of Northwest gang members who went "hunting" for rival gang members and ended up robbing some of

their “enemies” by gunpoint. While an 18-year-old gang member searched their pockets for valuables, the gang member holding the gun shot and killed one the hostages. That gang member had a large track record and by California’s 10-20 Life Law, was automatically facing life in prison. The story becomes serious when Dan tells me that the Northwest gang members involved in the robbery, including the 18-year-old were facing life sentences for murder. “You can be in the wrong place at the wrong time and somebody does something stupid and you can be facing life in prison,” Dan said. We interviewed Albert Valdez who finished serving a 10-year sentence for 5 counts of attempted murder upon a peace officer and gang enhancement. Albert was originally facing a life sentence for something he didn’t do. Yet he was guilty by association. He was at the wrong place at the wrong time. Valdez associated with Santa Maria’s Northwest street gang, but doesn’t consider himself a gang member. He once gained a lot of respect from the gang when he stole over 50 cars from a car dealer and gave them out to Northwest gang members. Valdez really began to seriously rethink his life when he gave notorious Northwest gang member Joseph Deleon a ride that he’ll never forget. (5)

Cohen: Albert, tell me about your association with Joseph Deleon.

Valdez: Joseph Deleon was a hardcore Northwest gang member. He had the keys to Santa Maria and was collecting taxes for the Mexican mafia. The lady that was with us went to go give him a ride and while we were leaving the house, we got pulled over by the cops and got into a high-speed chase and he ended up shooting at the police three times. (5)

Valdez was the passenger in the car driven by Barbara Trevino, when police attempted to pull the car over, resulting in a high-speed chase. Deleon fired three shots at the pursuing officers and Valdez was stuck with no control in hopeless situation. When the chase ended, Valdez, Deleon, and Trevino were all arrested and charged with five counts of attempted murder, five counts of drive by, five counts of shooting from a vehicle, and possession of methamphetamines. They were all facing life in prison. That day changed Valdez's life. (5)

“That day right there, basically changed my whole life. I mean, in many ways, I should've died by Santa Maria Police Department, you know, Santa Maria Police Department should've killed us that day. But, I'm still here. I'm living. I feel blessed that I've changed my life, or trying to change my life – in the process of it. I glad to be home,” Albert Valdez said. (5)

Valdez and Trevino both accepted plea agreements in exchange for their testimony against Deleon. “The result of the high-speed chase, I signed a 10-year deal. I'm lucky to be alive and I feel blessed. The gang life is not something you want to be involved in. You're either going to be a gang member, doing life in prison, or come home and be with your family. You got to make a decision. (5)

“In the gang world, they're just there to use you. They don't check on your family, they don't put money on your books, they don't do anything to help you as far as your life goes on outside. They leave you hanging, they try to give you a little friendship, a little union, to make you feel a little bit better, but that's not the way your life should be run. No money, no food, no anything, my kids had to live their lives without their dad, so, it was hard,” Valdez said. (5)

The reality of the situation is that these kids need to wake up about the seriousness of the gang life. Prosecutors are seeking the maximum penalties for gang members and they can get into trouble without even doing anything. Albert's story paints a somber picture of the consequences of hanging out with the wrong crowd and being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Helping these kids make better choices

As we tell these students the truth about gangs, uncover the lies, and show the severe consequences of being involved in gangs, we want to finish the documentary by providing these kids with an opportunity to learn how they can be helped through school, after-school programs, and community organizations. "To discourage the spread of gangs, there is an urgent need for personal and governmental organizations such as the police department, prosecutor's office and school districts to partner with communities that specialize in youth outreach and development. Michael Woodward, Chief of Freeport Police Department, said. (14) On my behalf, I feel extremely blessed to have parents that love and support me, raised in a non-threatening and safe community and opportunities to impact my future through education and employment. With all that I have, I feel a responsibility, but more importantly, a heart and desire to use my abilities to help these kids and the community must do the same.

"As a community and as a law enforcement agency, we have a responsibility to provide our children with education and with positive activities while they are out of school. We have a responsibility to provide them with mentors and with role models from whom they could learn. We have a responsibility as a law enforcement agency to redirect

them after an initial contact--often at a very young age--occurs. As a community, we have an obligation to provide them access to work and the ability to earn a living separate and apart from a gang structure,” Nassau County District Attorney Kathleen Rice said. (14) Ultimately, we want to give these kids hope for their future without gang involvement.

There are many reasons why kids decide to join gangs. “Poverty, poor education amongst students, jobless, unstable family structures - all contribute to our children exploring the idea of joining a gang. When a child does not see any hope for their future, namely retaining jobs, contributing to society, they do not pursue or maintain these goals. You ask these young people what their dreams are, their dreams are always the same, “I want to be a doctor.” “I want to be a lawyer.” “I want to be a nurse.” “I want to be a teacher.” These are things that they dream about. And yet, for a reason that we don't know, a lot of them lose those dreams and end up joining gangs. That child is at risk for entering a gang.” Chairman McCarthy said. (14)

“Certain factors can facilitate a gang presence, however, including an impersonal, alienating environment; a prevalence of bullying; a lack of trust between adults and students; a location that is in or near a gang neighborhood; and a lack of coordination with local law enforcement and community service organizations.” (Pesce et. al, 4) To rid gangs, the entire community needs to be spurred to action. It takes an entire city to solve a problem like this. We want to help start a movement towards a citywide call to action by first creating awareness through this video.

To reach these kids who have yet to commit serious crimes and are not yet facing the serious consequences of their actions, we have to take a different approach. “As long as gangs are glorified, as long as you have 10-year-olds thinking that this is a great thing,

we're going to have gang crime and we're going to have problems in the city," she said.

"I think the community needs to become more proactive at the really young level," Ann Bramsen said. (Yale, 7) We need to reveal the truth about the fallacies of gangs. We need to de-glamorize the gang lifestyle. We need to show the true colors of the "homies." They don't really have your back. At the end of the day, it's every man for himself. "Too often a school's response to gang-related offenses is suspension or expulsion. These approaches may be necessary for serious violent behavior but are generally ineffective for many infractions and tend to increase future problems rather than decrease targeted behaviors. Suspension and expulsion neither address the underlying cause of the problem nor teach students alternative strategies and decision-making skills. Moreover, the suspended or expelled student is unsupervised and on the street and is likely to fall further behind in school. However, research shows that schools that attempt to keep students in school and improve achievement improve school safety as compared to those that suspend or expel students." (Pesce et. al, 4)

"Communities must come together to address these children. Government, law enforcement, local education agencies, businesses, institutions of higher education, service providers and concerned citizens of all ages and walks of life must collaborate to meeting the needs of our children so they do not seek what they think is the need to join or form a gang," Chairman McCarthy said. (14)

One of the unique opportunities I was able to experience was filming the EDGE program and interviewing Jeremy Wallin at Kern Valley State prison. Wallin was a former Northwest gang member from Santa Maria who was sentenced to 98 years to life for execution-style murder, kidnapping, and robbery with the gang enhancement. When

Cohen was a detective on the Gang Suppression Unit, he chased Wallin and was involved in his arrest and prosecution. Wallin has since dropped out of the gang and became the president of the EDGE program in Kern Valley. Prison guards supervise the EDGE program, but inmates run the majority of it. The program brings boys ages 11 to 18 to spend a day at the prison, sent from school counselors as a recommendation from their schools. These boys wear mock jumpsuits, keep their hands behind their backs simulating handcuffs, and are marched around the prison to tour the facilities. Then they meet the EDGE brothers.

The EDGE brothers are all the inmates that help run the program and are all ex-gang members who all desire to keep kids from joining gangs and follow in their footsteps. A few selected inmates share graphic testimonies of their childhood leading up to their involvement in gangs. Although these men are extremely intimidating, they focus on respect, encouragement, and real talk to find out the roots of their involvement in gangs. They ask about family life, bad influences, and help the boys come up with realistic goals to be presented in front of everybody at the end of the program.

As we focus on these junior high school students, we need to be aware of the problems in schools that are drawing these kids into the gang life. “We must also work to ensure to take available time in our schools. Bullying and other school violence could either leave young people in school or searching for gang protection. Children, once again, need to know that schools are safe and provide a place where they can learn and grow,” Chairman McCarthy said. (14) The community needs to help these kids invest in their own futures. The gang life may seem attractive with the money, girls, and respect, but it leads to life in prison or early death. We want to give these kids hope beyond

gangs. “For our at-risk youth, we must not only invest in their education in making their education reverent. But we must invest in their personal development. This includes interventions for the parents, divorced parents, parents of at-risk children to strengthen families so that parents can essentially protect the lives of their young people and prevent them from the life of criminal activities, or worse, their death,” Chairman McCarthy said.

(14) The criminal justice system focuses on incarceration to rehabbing gang members and keeping them off the streets to protect the public. All these ex-gang members realize their worthlessness and how work and progression in the gangs mean absolutely nothing in the real world. They can’t hold jobs to provide for their families and they don’t know how to be good fathers and husbands. That’s why it’s so important to impact these kids early in their involvement and before they get involved in gangs. “To curb gang proliferation, we must focus on reaching children before they join a gang. We must think outside the box and be ready to invest in children and in communities preyed upon by gang activity” Rice said, “But if we are serious about protecting our children from gangs we must be willing to embark on unconventional and proactive strategies. We must be willing to aggressively target “at-risk” children and provide them with education and access to a variety of work experiences and positive role models. A successful approach must include a comprehensive plan for diversion for children experiencing their first minor brush with the system. Finally, we must be willing to implement bold programs to deal with post-jail re-entry and joblessness among those young adults convicted of a crime,” Chairman McCarthy said.” (14)

We want to highlight the after-school activities and summer programs provided by sports leagues and organizations like the YMCA and the Boys and Girls Club. “We

have partnered with schools in Hempstead and Westbury to offer summer school programs centered on athletic activities. With the help of these school districts, and some private and charitable resources, we've been able to make these programs successful and have had hundreds of participants during what is usually the most unstructured time of the year for any child. These summer camps offer children a safe alternative to the streets and give our office a glimpse into the life of a child possibly in need of further proactive outreach. Very often ``at-risk" children will be discovered in these programs and we can keep in touch with the child, their family and their school to provide additional assistance well after the summer is over. We anticipate that these summer camps will grow and that we will be able to expand into additional communities around Nassau County in the coming years." Rice said. (14)

Had these men had someone intervened on their behalf when they were younger, they could've had different and more positive lives.

Cohen: You think you would've been better off if you stayed away from gangs and drugs?

Ybarra: I think if I stayed away from drugs, gangs – yes, I most definitely would have been better off. Who knows? I could've went professional at skating or whatever you know? Pursued football, baseball, just been a regular Joe, you know? Hard working construction worker, whatever, you know? But my life would've most definitely been different. (6)

The Project

The project that I agreed to complete when I signed the contract on May 1, 2013 was to be completed after 5 months on October 1, 2013. That gave me around six weeks from when we began filming to create a preview for my senior project. I was able to use the footage I took from Kern Valley state prison and Santa Barbara county jail to create that preview. We have much more footage and interviews to take, but I'm excited to present a small glimpse into the impact we can have through this project.

Conclusion

Maya Angelou once said, "When you know better you do better." These junior high students are being lied to, manipulated, and pressured into making the wrong choices. These ex-gang member testimonies are a glimpse and an inside look at the reality of gangs. Most of these incarcerated men have wasted their lives, hurting the lives of their children, families, wives, and those they hurt while involved in gangs. It's too late for these men. That's why it's so important to reach these kids before they get involved in this lifestyle. Hope for their future should go beyond the façade of wealth and respect involved with gang members.

Evaluations

Dan had a desire to start this project over two years ago. After recruiting me to the documentary, we showed and impressed the Santa Maria police chief with samples of my work, and he gave the project his approval. He then asked the Santa Barbara Foundation, an organization that sponsors community projects and philanthropy, to sponsor our

project. After the money had been secured, Dan and I went to work creating a contract for me to be a contract worker for the city of Santa Maria. The contract process was drawn out and complicated due to the natural of government bureaucracy and while the city demanded liability insurance, the YMCA of Santa Maria stepped in and took over temporary employment and funds distribution. That sped up the process up and I officially began the project on May 1.

In the beginning of the project, I had a preconceived view of gang members and criminals in prison. Society identifies these men as the scum of society, and I had to admit that I was intimidated coming into contact with them. The gang dropouts we interviewed were actually really nice guys.

This project has been one of the most interesting experiences of my life. I had access to places, through Dan, that I never thought I'd ever experience like state prison and county jail. It's been a great opportunity to grow as a videographer and gain the work experience I need to come away with this and find a full-time job.

I completed the video trailer and showed Dan. He sent the link to multiple people involved in the project and it received rave reviews. It confirmed the trust Dan had in me to create a powerful and well-made video for this project, and hopefully secure more support and funding.

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