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The Making of a Gang Boy

Chris Castaño Ruiz, Ph.D., ACSW, BCD¹

A long time ago, during the Depression days, Cresencio Ruiz and his wife Mañuela, were blessed with an eight-pound son named Cresencio (Chris). Cresencio and Mañuela were my parents and had emigrated from Mexico in about 1920. I remember my mother telling me of the time the federal troops barged into her home when she was nine years of age, shooting her father for his involvement with Francisco Villa and *La Revolucion*. This left an indelible mark on my mind. Mañuela, her younger sibling, Teresa, and her mother, Doña Jesus, crossed the border and entered the U.S.A. via Nogales. Cresencio met Mañuela in Phoenix, Arizona, and they were later married at St. Mary's Church. He was the band leader with an all-Mexican circus called *El Circo Escalante*. *El Circo* toured all over the Southwest with Manuela as one of the singers in the circus.

As the Depression continued, things became difficult for everyone all over the country. *El Circo Escalante* folded up. Cresencio and Mañuela divorced when I was one year old. Mañuela remarried and went to California—Happy Valley barrio, to be more precise. I stayed with my father and godparents in Phoenix. My father and my *padrinos* (godparents) qualified to play in the Works Progress Administration band in Phoenix. This was a New Deal program to help cultivate all forms of the arts in our society. I remember attending the Sunday evening concerts at Encanto Park and in neighboring cities. I also

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recall standing in line once a month with my foster parents, waiting to collect the monthly commodities under the then Relief Program (Welfare), while in the daytime Cresencio dug ditches, built parks, fixed roads, etc., as a laborer in the WPA.. My father died in 1938. By age nine, I began to get into different kinds of trouble, such as stealing, defying authority, and the like.

Education

In the public schools in Phoenix, I got into trouble with my teachers for speaking in Spanish. You see, it was natural for me to speak in Spanish as this was the primary means of communication at home, at church, and with my peers. Two particular teachers, angered and perhaps frustrated, would turn red, perspire, and with rage (no doubt a case of poor mental health) would shout, "You speak American, you understand! This is not Mexico!" Wham! Wham! Wham! I recall two teachers specifically who ended their sadistic orgy only after one of the Chicano students would break down and cry. We soon learned a new behavior modification system in order to cope with the teachers' behavior. It was simple conditioning: All the Chicano kids had to do was shed a few tears, and the teachers would back off. B.F. Skinner could just as well have done laboratory experimentation at Douglas Elementary and James Monroe Junior High School.

As I got into more and more trouble, the abuse administered to me on a regular basis by my foster parents and the total home environment provided me did not help things any. I had to be placed in an institution called the Jamieson Ranch—School for Incurable Boys. By the time I was 12, I had run away from home at least nine times. Needless to say, by this time I was told by school authorities and my foster parents I would *never* amount to anything.

In 1940, now in my early teens, I persuaded the boyfriend of one of my foster sisters (I'll call him Alonzo) to give me a ride to California. I successfully completed my runaway scheme. Cautious not to be caught nor implicated in such a scheme, Alonzo, who was an interstate produce truck driver, hid me in the sleeping compartment of a diesel transporting citrus into California. A million thoughts went

through my mind while I crouched in the corner of the sleeping compartment, covered with blankets as the border inspector asked Alonzo questions about his load. My heartbeat was so loud and fast I was afraid to open my mouth for fear my heart and guts would come out of my mouth. I even thought my heartbeat would be heard by the inspector. I thought of the friends I had to leave behind in Phoenix—would they break my confidence and tell my foster parents? If the juvenile authorities caught me, would I have to go back to Jamieson Ranch? What if Alonzo were caught and charges of kidnapping were brought against him? AND, what would it be like to live in California with my mother, stepfather and two half-brothers, etc.?

Finally, 50 miles inside the California border, Alonzo applied the air brakes, jumped out of the truck, opened the sleeping compartment, held his arms outstretched, laughed, and said, “Everything is Okay, we are in California. Come in the cab and relax and sleep if you’re tired.” I was so elated. I gave Alonzo a tight Chicano *abrazo*² and with tears running down my cheeks, I told him over and over, “*Gracias, gracias*. When we find my mother’s house, you will be cared for.”

Alonzo and I walked from the produce terminal annex on 9th and Alameda Streets in Los Angeles to Happy Valley barrio, a distance of some 25 miles or so. We stopped at a restaurant in downtown Los Angeles and had breakfast. The breakfast included two pancakes, cereal, three eggs, sausage, milk, four slices of buttered toast and mashed potatoes. The price: 26 cents!

After only one week of getting acquainted with my stepfather and half-brothers, plus getting to know my mother for the first time, I was involved in a fight in a local pool hall. This was life as usual for me. What was different was watching my very passive mother driven and driving herself to despair and apathy because of her husband’s behavior. I saw my stepfather cheat on my mother weekend after weekend. At times, my stepfather would not come home for three or four days. My mother felt she had to see this marriage through, at least until her

²A hug.

two smaller boys would be old enough to be on their own. She did eventually leave her husband after their two sons had grown. Now a *pachuco*³, I continued to engage in fist fights on a one-to-one basis; in fact, I rather welcomed this kind of conflict. But what was a new experience for me was being “jumped” by six boys at a time. Aha! I soon learned the *modus operandi* of the *pachuco* gang.

Gang Acceptance

Having thus experienced my initiation, I was soon accepted as a member of the Rose Hill and Happy Valley Pachuco Gang. The *muchachito* from “small town” Phoenix was now a big-time *mator*⁴ leader of a northeast Los Angeles Rose Hill *pachuco gang*. For the first time in my life, I really felt I belonged. I commanded the respect of my peers and, most important, the *pachucas* in the barrio and at Abraham Lincoln High School took notice of the new *pachuco*.

During the early forties, we Americans of Mexican descent were not allowed to sit wherever we wanted, even though we paid our admission—at the Los Angeles, Lowe’s State, Million Dollar, or the United Artists Theaters. Balconies were designated for ethnic minorities. A local roller skating rink across the street from Lincoln Park (the site of the Plaza de la Raza) allowed Chicanos and Blacks on separate days and evenings.

My daily schedule was quite an active one. Between 1940-47, my time was spent in gang fights, retaliatory skirmishes against Anglo marines and sailors who invaded my barrio, gang fights against Anglo gangs from El Sereno, interviews with social workers, sociologists, probation and parole officers, running and hiding from the police in the Flat Top area, getting into fights with the “Rah-Rah” and “ROTC Goodie-Goodie” boys from Lincoln High School, working as a bus boy and in car washes, doing migratory farm labor all over California, boxing, getting drunk, fighting with teachers, going in and out of

³Mexican American youth gang member of the 1940s.

⁴*Muy macho* or “tough guy”

Juvenile Hall, and in and out of every police station in Los Angeles. In 1942, I was kicked out of Lincoln High School by the boys' vice-principal, who wasn't necessarily hospitable towards ethnic minorities. I remember the words he yelled at me as he grasped me by my collar with one hand and twisted my arm behind my back. "I want you to get your dirty, poor — out of here! You and your kind will never amount to anything! You're a loser!!" I really thought the V.P. had his gall; I was poor, yes, but not dirty! These same words were also repeated by the juvenile officials of the Highland Park, Eagle Rock, Central, University Park, and Georgia Street Police Stations.

Many *pachucos* joined the Armed Forces where conflict and aggression were now rewarded rather than punished. I also tried to use this outlet by enlisting in the Navy, but was rejected (another rejection—even patriotism couldn't accept me) because of a perforated eardrum caused by a heavy-handed policeman who once questioned me. Later on, however, I was accepted by the U.S. Army Paratroopers.

My turbulent and stormy life continued into my marriages. For instance, in 1942, at age 16, I married my high school and next door neighbor-girlfriend with whom I had two boys, Ronald and Arnold. Within four years, the marriage ended in a divorce. Both Ronald and Arnold became gang members, and Ronald later died as a result of a drug overdose. A second marriage produced two more boys, Gregory and Danny. This marriage only lasted four and one half years.

People Can Change

In 1951, while serving in the U.S. Army, I earned my Paratrooper Wings at Fort Benning, Georgia. At that point I began to experience many changes, which led me toward higher education and conversion to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In 1953, I enrolled at East Los Angeles Community College, went on to earn my BA. in sociology from California State University—Los Angeles. I also pursued graduate education, receiving a masters in social work from the University of Southern California—Los Angeles in 1961. In 1968, I was appointed Chair of the first Chicano Studies Department at East Los Angeles College, the first one in the nation. In 1972, I was

appointed Associate Superintendent of Mesa Public Schools, Mesa, Arizona. In 1973, at the age of 47, I received my doctorate in education from Claremont Graduate School in Claremont, California. In 1974-75, I was selected to serve as the first Chicano director of Colegio Jorge Washington in Cartagena, Colombia, South America. My last position in California was with Child Protective Services investigating all facets of child abuse as well as providing clinical therapy. On March 9, 1992, I, Dr. Chris Ruiz—or “Lil Man,” as I am still known by my gang name in East Los Angeles—joined the faculty at Brigham Young University as an Associate Clinical Professor.

It took people of mixed color—“tossed salad” is the phrase I prefer—to help me turn my life around. For instance, as a child, it was a *Black* woman, a “friendly visitor” (before the term “social worker”) who impressed me with her kindness when my family was on county welfare in Arizona. It was a *white* woman, a music teacher in my junior high school who cushioned my physical and emotional hurt. She would always praise my singing talent. It was an *Italian* man, the local “rag man,” who used to stop by my house in Phoenix on Saturdays to give me used shoes and pants. During my adolescent turmoil, a probation officer of *Mexican* background his *white* co-worker helped me. My socio-political awareness is owed to six persons: two *Jewish* women, three *Jewish* men, and a social-worker-activist-turned-politician of *Mexican* descent. Two persons, one *white Catholic* and the other *white Protestant* taught me community organization skills before I began my formal higher education. It was they who helped turn me into an activist advocate. Because of the financial support received from a *Catholic Filipino* and his *Mexican-American* spouse, I was able to purchase my home in Arizona. It was a white educator who recruited me to be the recipient of a good-sized scholarship as a Ford Fellow, which helped me work on my doctorate. My first job as an outreach social worker is due to a *Presbyterian minister* of Mexican descent. At the age of thirteen, my first exposure to “religion” was from a *Navajo* man in Phoenix, Arizona. The persons who were responsible for my first teaching job were a *white* male and a *Chinese* lady in Los Angeles, and my psychotherapist was *white* and a *Mormon*. Needless to say, countless other people of diverse backgrounds assisted me and still

provide support in my growth and development. The Lord is not through with me yet.

A Solution to Gang Behavior: Outreach Services

My professional experiences as a street-gang worker started in a settlement house in East Los Angeles in the fifties. Cleland House of Neighborly Services operated under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church. The greatest percentage of its clientele were Catholic and people of Mexican ancestry. It was situated in a low-income section of East Los Angeles. The house was surrounded by an area containing a medium-sized softball field and included a two-story stucco building with administrative offices, counseling rooms, an arts and craft room, and a medium-sized enclosed gymnasium.

My task was to do extensive outreach work with youth who were involved in gang activities. Although there were four other youth service agencies close to Cleland House, not one of them had a program to reach out to such youth involved with gangs. I was recruited to do outreach work with these youth with special problems because of my background and training. From the recruitment phase to my formal interview with the Executive Director, Reverend Antonio L. Hernandez, and the Agency's Personnel Committee, I was assured total support in order to reach out to the neighborhood troubled youth who were menacing the entire area. In the early phase of my work, I spent half of my time with youth in a local pool-hall, a hang-out for some of the hard-core members of one particular gang: "*Hoyo Mara*."⁵ My entree was a 1957 convertible T-Bird, my paratrooper boots, white T-shirt, khaki pants, and a crew cut. I would purposely park my car in front of the pool hall with my guitar (as bait) resting on the front seat. Within minutes, a youngster or two would approach my T-Bird, ask if I played *la lira* then ask if I could play it.⁶

The visitor was always accommodated. Casual conversation followed about the youngster, myself, school, work, and hobbies. The

⁵*Hoyo* = hole, *mara*, short for *maravilla*, or marvelous. Hence, Marvelous Hole Gang.

⁶Colloquial for guitar

communication was half *pochó*⁷ combined with Chicano street talk. I had acquired the lingo early on during my *pachuco* era of the forties. The youngster would end our encounter quite abruptly as someone beckoned him to go back into the pool-hall. It took seven or more such visits to the local pool hall where I would play pool with some of the older *batos*⁸ in order to gain their confidence. I spent enough time with them in their environment so that I could get to know them and invite them to come to the Settlement House to work out with weights, participate in boxing, wrestling, and learn to play guitar. I knew that once the youth felt comfortable and trusted me, they would participate. I was also confident that once the leaders came to the agency, the rest would follow.

Between 1953-1973, using group work as a method of helping individuals change their violent, destructive behavior to more socially acceptable behavior, I was able to help dissolve five gangs. The young men progressed from gangs to car clubs, guitar groups, athletic clubs and youth service groups. Within the first year of my outreach work with troubled youth, I organized beginner, intermediate and advanced guitar classes. As the *batos* improved their skills they moved up to the next class. All honed their skills in order to be in the advanced class where they could perform at several social activities, specifically at the Annual Settlement House Fiesta, a fund raiser in which the boy sang and played Mexican folk songs on a stage. The audiences included members of the community, parents, and community leaders. For five years after this began, former gang members were invited to perform at the Mexican Village, an exhibit area at the annual Los Angeles County Fair held in Pomona, California.

After two years and countless hours of home visits with the parents of gang members, hours spent doing family counseling; referring some of them to welfare services; coordinating services with parents and probation officers; transporting parents to schools, hospitals, juvenile hall, and county jails; providing translation services; assisting youth with court appearances; locating employment; taking them on

⁷Combination of English and Spanish

⁸Gang leaders

field trips to the Rams football games and the beach, and holding ongoing informal and formal group sessions, I was able to establish my credibility. The people I served knew I was available to them 24 hours a day. On many occasions I was called at home at 2:00 a.m. by parents who were having a crisis. I would stay with them until the particular problem was resolved, at least temporarily.

The Director of the Agency for Cleland House was also President of the East Los Angeles Coordinating Council. This group was composed of representatives from public and private agencies and groups such as the East Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, Social Services, high school and junior high school principals, counselors, Probation Department, Public Health Nurses, County Parks and Recreation Department, Catholic Youth Organization, and Variety Boys Club, as well as local business representatives and service organizations. From time to time youth from the guitar groups were invited to perform during the Council's luncheon meetings. This was a great ego builder for the youth. Ironically, some of the school administrators present at these functions were persons who earlier had told me and some of the members of the guitar groups that they were losers and would never amount to anything. Shades of the 1940s!

Some of the parents wanted to get more involved with us and requested their own Parents Guitar Group. I helped organize such a group. They called themselves "*Las Clelandias*," a name synonymous with Cleland House of Neighborly Service, the Agency's name. They, too, with the help of Lucy Hernandez, wife of Reverend Hernandez, performed for several fiestas in and out of the community. What an ideal situation! Gang boys and their parents were involved in the same program with the goals of helping improve their self-esteem and increase their positive involvement in their community. Many of the parents were also members of the citizenship class I taught at the Agency.

In 1958, I wrote a proposal and presented it to the Director. The proposal essentially centered on a work-camp concept where gang boys, according to their level of progress in counseling, would be taken to a ranch where they would work, earn money, develop leadership skills, leave the violent barrio for two weeks, receive counseling,

have recreation. On their return home, they would serve as recruiters for future projects participants. The Director approved the approval.

The majority of the parents approved the idea for several reasons. In essence, they felt their youth needed to get away from the barrio, from gang activities. They also liked the idea of their sons earning money to buy clothes and in general, help support the family. Pre-planning had also revealed that some of the Agency's board members had friends who owned large fruit orchards and ranches. The first work-camp experiment took place in Hemet, California. All the necessary protocol, such as health, legal, insurance, transportation, etc. was arranged. All interested parents and youth met at the agency a couple of times to discuss the goals and objectives of this special project and to give suggestions. The budget was discussed, and it was agreed that each participant would contribute at least five dollars. The total cost of the work camp was twenty dollars per youngster. Administratively, it had been discussed and agreed that money would not be a reason for a boy being denied attendance. It was agreed that the integrity of each family and youngster had to be preserved and respected. Some of the youth volunteered to work at the agency for the work-camp. It was also agreed that if at anytime during the work-camp a youngster's behavior became uncontrollable, after group consensus, I would call the parents and have them pick up the participant. The other option was that I would call the Agency Director who would then drive to the work-camp site, pick up the youngster, and drive him to his home.

Each youth rotated performing such tasks as setting up for breakfast, lunch, and dinner and doing clean-up chores. The older boys rigged up an outdoor shower stall. Each leader received a one-half discount on the camp fee. Each task group selected its own leader. At least twice a week the owner of the farm would walk to the backyard, our campsite, and present a freshly baked hot apricot pie along with ice cream to the group. In return, the youth volunteered to entertain the owner's church congregation during social events. Because of the experimental nature of such a project, it was decided the first group would be comprised of eight youth plus two older boys (16-17). The older youth served as assistants. Two agency vans were used to trans-

port the youth, food, tents, and other equipment to the work-camp site. The Agency Director, in all cases, assisted, then returned to the agency.

On Sunday, those youth of Catholic background or Protestant background were driven to their church. On some occasions the youth went swimming in the afternoon. The length of each work-camp was fifteen days. As was to be expected, the harder the youngster worked, the more apricots were picked and the more money was made. Earnings for the period ranged from \$58 and \$110. Not a single youth was sent home for behavior or health problems during each work-camp session.

The therapeutic value in terms of changing negative to positive attitudes can be assessed to the degree that the forty-two youth from their various gangs were helped to gain insight into their problems and change their behavior. It was clear that gang-violent behavior was curbed within the immediate area of the Agency. As the years went by and the youth got older, all became junior leaders in the Agency's regular summer camp program; some became part-time staff members, some became guitar instructors at the Agency, one started his own private guitar class, many completed their probation, some joined the armed forces, still others got married, and a few returned to school. The best vignette, and there are many, is about a young man I'll call Larry, who was a drug user and a gang leader, a violent person. By 1964, he had become a regional representative of sales, responsible for the supervision of over one thousand employees. In 1970 he was appointed Executive Director of Cleland House of Neighborly Service, the same Agency which had hired the author as a street-gang worker some twenty years earlier.

Upon graduation from USC with a masters degree in social work, I was offered a position at the Neighborhood Youth Association, an agency sponsored by the Episcopalian Church. It serves youth with more-than-average delinquent behavior in Los Angeles and in San Pedro, California. During my two years at NYA, I presented a similar work-camp project proposal to the Director. The project was approved by the Board of Directors. Using exactly the same program, two work-camp projects were planned and successfully accomplished.

In this case, each group met during the summer months of June and July, 1962, working a large pecan farm of one of the NYA board members in Paso Robles, California. Some of the work tasks included learning how to set up steel rods for wire fences. The format of a regular work day plus week-end activities was an exact duplicate of the first work-camp project initiated in East Los Angeles. The only difference was that the composition of the group had an ethnic mix: Mexican, Anglo, Black, Tongan and Filipino.

One of the success stories of the NYA work-camp activity was a young man I'll call Jerry. Jerry had been referred to NYA for violent behavior—gang violence, stealing, beating up teachers, truancy, drug abuse, and running away from home. At the age of seven he had witnessed his natural father kill his mother with a knife. As a young child, he displayed anger and hostile acting-out behavior. He choked cats, set fire to outdoor trash bins, and the like. As he got older, he developed an interest in art. By the time he entered in high school his art work took a distorted twist. He drew pictures of his mother with a dagger through her head with minute details, such as the blood oozing from her head. The services of a psychiatrist were available to the staff on a weekly consultation basis, so Jerry's drawings were analyzed by the psychiatrist, who determined that Jerry felt anger because his mother had "abandoned him." His anger was displaced and projected onto all females, but especially onto all male authority figures.

Because of Jerry's deep emotional problem, he was provided, besides group work, several one-on-one sessions with me. Jerry's art teacher also knew of Jerry's problem; in fact, she had referred him for group counseling at NYA. One day Jerry came to show me a picture he had drawn of his art teacher. Jerry's drawing was a large 20" x 18". His group members and I encouraged him to submit it to his high school annual drawing contest. He agreed and was one of the top three finalists. That meant he qualified for the final art entry. In February he submitted his outline on the topic: Draw a Picture of Your Neighborhood. Between March and the first of June he worked on his picture while attending his group sessions after school and

going on field trips with our group on weekends. By mid-June his 25" x 36" framed picture depicting his neighborhood had won first prize! It was exhibited for one month in the main entrance of his school. He received several certificates for his accomplishment.

Jerry's picture, drawn in black with white background, shows the names of the streets in his neighborhood, spacious homes, men, families, and children playing in a local park, and business establishments with people smiling while doing their shopping. An important and significant character in the drawing is a mother spritely pushing her stroller on the sidewalk. Jerry, early on, told me he had never told anyone that the lady pushing the stroller was his mother and the baby being strolled was him. His image of himself and his neighborhood had taken on a new dimension. His drawing had none of the death images of the past. Through a contact at the Agency, an appointment was set up to have Jerry meet one of the most popular Black artists in Los Angeles, who lived in the secluded area of Beverly Hills, California. His friend was indeed impressed with Jerry's art work. He gave Jerry advice and invited him to a couple of art shows which Jerry attended.

It was also during this time that all first-place winners from area school districts were invited to display their art work in the main window of one of the largest clothing stores in Los Angeles. Jerry's picture was exhibited for one month, and he received praise from all segments of the community. This made him very happy, and built his self-esteem tremendously. He no longer exhibited violent behavior at home, at school or in the neighborhood. He was seen as a celebrity. He said he had "grown up" and "didn't need to be in gangs." He graduated from high school. The day he left the Agency, Jerry presented me with his prize-winning drawing, a present I still possess and which I cherish. A follow-up four years later showed that Jerry and his brother had started a landscaping business hiring youth from their neighborhood.

Reach Out and Get Involved

In March of 1992, a few days after my arrival in Provo, I was approached by a group of Latinos and asked to help them with such

issues as education, health and welfare, police-community relations, unemployment, civic affairs, youth gangs, and drug abuse. I helped found the Utah County Latino Council and am currently its advisor/consultant and parliamentarian. I am also currently a member of the Brigham Young University Advisory Committee for Ethnic Affairs and the Utah County Gang Task Force. I am also a member of the Diversity Committee of the Counseling and Development Center at the University. I also chair a subcommittee on Ethnic Minority Affairs. The committee is currently comprised of eleven Polynesians, ten Hispanics, three Blacks, three Anglos, one Portugese, and is, at this writing, in the process of recruiting high school students who are or have been "gang bangers." We hope to offer some solutions to the gang problems in the Wasatch Front. There are growing needs and opportunities for all of the helping professions to assist in the task of reaching out to our community and our nation's youth. It is my hope that AMCAP members will look for opportunities to get involved.

I know that working with youth is difficult. Working with troubled youth is even more difficult. The old adage, "You win some, you lose some" holds true for clinical work. However, those of us who have made it a specialized area of service can appreciate the changes made in even one individual's life. There are thousands of youth out there needing positive strokes. They are *our* youth. It's incumbent upon us to reach out to them. Be creative. Place your faith and hope in the future of your nation. The poor, the needy, the homeless, the delinquent, the abused child, the gang—boy or girl—they are your children, too. There is a phrase that is picking up momentum across our land among Hispanics. "*Si see puede! Si queremos! Si podemos!*" ("It can be done! We want to! We can do it!"). As Cab Calloway, black musician of another era, used to sing, "You've got to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, latch on to the affirmative. Don't mess with Mr. Inbetween." Change can happen. I have a personal testimony of this.