

**From A Gang Lifestyle to a Life of Community Activism**

*The Power of Well Managed, Carefully Designed Educational and Life Skills Programs  
in Assisting Formerly Violent, Gang-Affiliated Youth Who Live in Areas of Concentrated  
Disadvantage*

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Ely Flores

LA CAUSA YouthBuild  
Los Angeles Communities Advocating for Unity Social Justice and Action

As a child, I was abandoned by my father and I grew up in both south Hollywood and South Central L.A. -- in a under resourced, oppressed community where more youth are sent to prisons rather than rehabilitation programs. Our mothers were so overwhelmed they could do little to prevent us young men from searching for meaning and a sense of belonging on streets that led straight to prison or death. Violence was my learned resolution for all the challenges I faced. Like many young people who grow up in poor, disenfranchised communities with few opportunities, I lived by the law of “dog eat dog” and “survival of the fittest.”

I raised my fists in violence over nothing. Maybe someone made fun of my shoes or clothes. Perhaps someone talked negatively about my mother, brother, or sister. Perhaps someone challenged my so called “man hood.” A fight was always the conclusion. Where I’m from, being scarred and bruised was like wearing military stripes or medals won on a battlefield. Whenever the pain was too much to bear, a dose of marijuana relieved me. The older gangsters found it fun to pit a kid against another kid by instigating little disagreements that escalated into a fight. Violence was commonplace. It was entertainment and to us kids, it seemed normal.

Violence plus the lack of resources and dearth of opportunity made it easy for me and other kids to pursue fantasy lives – to emulate gangster lifestyles and drug dealing. My brother and I slipped into that, too. I’ve been in situations where I was forced to fight individuals for “claiming” (stating) their membership to another gang that we did not get along with. My anger and violence led me to use weapons; to hurt people. I conditioned myself not to care whether or not my victim ended up in the hospital or dead. The same rules my homies and I lived by, also ruled the people I thought of as my enemy.

One of the experiences that changed my life was when one of my homies was shot dead at the age of 14. He used to be a skate boarder. He always promised that he’d never join a gang. But one day peer pressure -- and a lack of other options -- got the best of him. He joined the local gang. A month later he was shot and killed next to my grandmother’s house. The cycle continued with years of retaliation.

Life stories like mine are quite common amongst poor and disenfranchised youth everywhere in the U.S. First we begin to hang out with gangs and eventually this road takes us to places like prison, drug addiction, and homelessness and for some of us, death.

As I began developing my consciousness about social issues, I asked myself, “Why are there so many poor people in prisons and especially black and brown people? And why do they keep going back? Is it the people’s fault, the community’s fault, or the parents?” Then I realized that I was trying to come up with answers from an oppressed and deficit perspective. Of course there has to be some accountability for the people but accountability also must lie with institutions that contribute to the problem and don’t help

to solve this problem that effects not just the young people caught up in a cycle of violence and deprivation, but the entire society in which we live. .

South Central LA is already a poor community but continuously prisons (in the absence of decent educational programs and rehabilitation programs) and police continue the criminalization of many communities of color. I agree that there needs to be law enforcement and too, incarceration for the extreme and very few cases of people who might be beyond rehabilitation and who pose a threat to public safety. But I also believe that there needs to be far more resources, programs, jobs and rehabilitation coming to the community, rather than easy arrests, more incarceration, and the costly practice of just building of more prisons. Too many lives, especially those of young people of color, are just being written off in a society that pours its vital resources into imprisoning a most precious resource: Young people who are truly are eager to contribute in a positive manner to something meaningful, other than to gang fights on the street.

As I adopted a gang life style, incarceration naturally followed. For four years I went in and out of prison. Some people say I was just a knuckle head but I say that the mission statements of jails that claim to rehabilitate people skipped me. I was never given any resources to better my life or to improve a community I truly did care for. I had to go hunt for resources outside of my community because there simply were not any in mine. I was hungry for change. However, jail and probation officers never seemed to believe me. I felt I'd been written off. But, I was lucky in the end. I found an organization like the Youth Justice Coalition and LA CAUSA YouthBuild that believe in the empowerment of young people to better their lives and their communities.

LA CAUSA YouthBuild, an affiliate of YouthBuild USA, and a grantee of the US Department of Labor's YouthBuild program, introduced me to a life of positive transformation, self accountability, and leadership. It is but one example – a successful example – of what's possible when government resources are invested in young people rather than in jails that warehouse them. This organization offered me the opportunity to develop lifelong skills that would better myself and most important, would allow me to be a part of something bigger than myself. Youth Build allowed me the privilege of contributing in a positive manner to my community. I participated full-time and earned my GED. At the same time, I learned priceless job skills while building much-needed affordable housing for homeless and low income people. All the while, YouthBuild staff provided personal counseling and positive role models, a safe environment. I learned leadership skills and received encouragement from the staff members, who unlike the employees of the jails I was in, really believed in me. This wasn't a welfare program. YouthBuild provided the key. It was up to me to open that door to a new road. Getting on this road forever changed my life.

Because of that key they offered me, I became an activist. Because of that key, I have developed a passion for community work and helped numerous people in diverse and challenging communities. That opportunity that is rarely given to people was given to me and has enabled me to become an expert in the field of Youth Development, Leadership development, and Community Organizing and has allowed me to train others

across this nation. That opportunity and handing of resources has given me congressional recognition by Hilda Solis and recognition from the city of Los Angeles. That recognition has even given me the opportunity to fly to Israel and devote my time to try and build peace amongst Israeli and Palestinian Youth. Imagine that. An ex-gang member, a once violent young man, a former drug addict and ex-criminal now offers his life and time to serve for the cause of peace and the people. Yes, I worked hard to get where I am. But my story is not an anomaly. So many young people, given a chance through well-designed, positive youth programs, really can turn their lives around and contribute in positive ways to make communities safer and more prosperous.

I want you to imagine for a minute that I, Ely Flores of Los Angeles, CA, the person that stands in front of you today, was never given that key for transformation. What would have I become? A long term prisoner, a wanted felon or just another city and national statistic of incarcerated people of color. Your guess is as good as mine. But that key was given to me by a group of people of color who looked like me, who created an organization that offered me resources and empowerment in East Los Angeles and deterred my direction of destruction towards a direction of productivity. The resources to give me that key came from the federal government, thanks to decisions of legislators like you, who decided to fund the federal YouthBuild program. The problem is, that the 226 YouthBuild programs that have been created with federal funds and serve just 8,000 youth a year are turning away many thousands of young people like me every year for lack of funds, and 1,000 organizations have applied to the federal government for YouthBuild funding and most have been turned away for lack of funds. This is a sin and a tragedy, as I think of the young people coming behind me who will not have the opportunity I have had. Right now, there is a recommendation in front of the appropriations sub-committee for Labor/HHS from many legislators and the Congressional Black Caucus and the Latino Caucus and the US Conference of Mayors to increase the YouthBuild appropriation from \$59M to \$100M, and I fervently hope they will do it.

I urge you all to become heroic politicians and people that offer keys of transformation to the thousands of youth and adults with a potential like mine – the potential to become agents for change to their communities and the future of this nation. Think about my story and use it as proof that change is possible in communities dominated by the gang culture if you just provide and offer well-designed and well-managed resources and opportunities to communities in poverty. At the very least, equalize resources and opportunities to those of the rising prison systems. Be the givers of those keys that will open thousands of doors of hope, doors of transformation, and doors of change to people like me. Make the right choice. Choose hope and optimism.

I thank you for your time. I ask only that you keep in mind the possibility that a young gang member can become a productive member of society. It is possible for a gang member to become an agent for positive change.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this very important matter.