

A Different Healing Gang Youth Within a Tribal Circle



The Process of Gang Formation

While the economic boom of the 90s brought a reduction in all crime categories, the current recession has brought about an increase — with Los Angeles recording 198 gang homicides as of mid-year. Higher rates of poverty have always produced more children afflicted by learning disabilities, poor health, overburdened schools, stressed families and lack of opportunity. It is precisely these characteristics that describe nearly all gang-involved youth.¹

The role of learning disabilities (LD) is the least considered when addressing delinquency. When tested, the rates of LD for incarcerated juveniles range from 70 to almost 100 percent.² With poverty and social stress come increases in the percentage of children who have problems in school and who fail to obtain a basic competence. Our school curriculums, special education resources and funding levels are designed around the prediction that most children will progress normally, and only a small number will require extra attention. This falls apart when the number of children who have difficulty overwhelms a school's capacity to respond. In the same regard, parents in such communities seldom have the educational skills or financial resources to intervene successfully.

With few exceptions, the progression to gang involvement begins with problems in elementary school and progresses to chronic truancy, school failure and petty crime by junior high. By mid-adolescence, erratic attendance, poor skills, low grades, addictions and criminal records become severe barriers to employment, extra-curricular activities and most other avenues for developing skills and a healthy self-concept.

Such a teenager, with little or no access to conventional forms of success and no attachment to positive institutions like church, work or school, naturally gravitates toward a peer group of others like himself. As these groups, or gangs, take shape, they also become attractive to kids who may not have had as difficult a history, but who for one reason or another feel alienated. This is particularly true of girls, and it only widens the circle of kids participating in gang activity.³

With little to lose, time on their hands and easy access to weapons, drugs, and cars, gang youth

inevitably choose activities that lead to destructive, criminal or addictive behaviors. As their numbers increase, territorial disputes arise between groups and violence becomes a constant threat. Inevitably, frequent contact with the law leads to incarceration, which creates a sense of normalcy about it. Comfort with the idea of jail time becomes a critical rite of passage into long-term delinquency.

In the end, gang members find themselves being rotated through schools, special programs, therapists, probation officers and detention facilities. These individuals and institutions try to work with or punish the youth into a new behavior. But alone they cannot provide the consistent, long-term support necessary for this youth to grow into a different identity. The gang member learns that the commitment to him is always temporary and conditional. In time, the present professionals will be replaced by the next program or placement. The ultimate threat, incarceration, contains little fear, as it is difficult to punish someone who has nothing to lose.

No single adult, whether a parent, probation officer, therapist or teacher, is strong enough or has time enough to give the long-term discipline, supervision, education, involvement, and encouragement this young person needs to redefine his or her life. It still takes a village to raise a child. This is a fact that some Indian communities are building into a radical concept of juvenile justice.⁴

The Emergence of Gangs on Native American Reservations

The chronic poverty of reservation life has long contained the potential for gang development. A near total lack of infrastructure, including phones, water systems and roads, with the difficulty of securing loans for further development on federal land, has created Indian communities in which there is little employment available. Life expectancies as low as 48 years result from poor nutrition, inadequate medical care and high disease rates. Teenage suicide, alcoholism and school dropout rates up to 60 percent higher than non-Indian youth give an indication of the toll that reservation conditions take on Indian teens.⁵

In spite of the above, it is only in the last few years that Indian teenagers have engaged in the type of gang related

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Art Titled "Nocturne" by R.C. Gorman Courtesy of R.C. Gorman Gallery

by Arturo Hernandez

violence and delinquency common to metropolitan areas. As the distance between city and rural reservation has diminished, Indian teens have gained access to the same drugs, weapons, role models and criminal opportunities as other youth. The one study that has been conducted on Indian gang youth found that children who joined gangs on the Navajo reservation were those who: did not speak their native language, had lost touch with clan and tribal ceremony, reported severe problems in school, were poor, had problems at home and had spent much of their youth in the city. In other words, they were plagued by the same factors as their adrift, marginalized urban peers.⁶

Keeping Pima-Maricopa Gang-Members Within the Tribal Circle

Traditionally a farming culture, the Pima-Maricopa cultivated for centuries an extensive and effective canal system that formed the basis for their economy. The diversion of the Salt River at the turn of the century destroyed this irrigation system and defeated the Indian farmer, creating mass, enduring unemployment and poverty for the tribe.

In addition, an erratic education by off reservation schools worked against Pima youth. Boarding schools interrupted the learning of language and culture, and the 1974 decision by the city of Scottsdale to remove all Pima-Maricopa students left children temporarily without schooling. Subsequent busing to the Mesa school district, which dispersed the Indian students across a dozen schools, resulted in an almost universal drop out. With a lack of phone service and reliable transportation to most reservation residents, communication between teachers and Indian families broke down. The convergence of educational failure, loss of culture, teenage drug use, poverty and exposure to the metropolitan of Phoenix created a gang problem severe enough to attract national attention.

By definition, a tribe is a group of people who have a connection and an obligation to each other, and this fact led to a philosophy for working with their gang-involved youth. Instead of allowing a troubled teen to be handed back and forth between a fragmented group of institutions, there should be a consistent group of adults across the community which this youth could not escape from, and who would support each other in their work.

The Pima-Maricopa responded to their gang crisis by developing an approach steeped in tribal thinking. They organized three traditionally detached institutions into a single charter school under one principal: a regular 7th through 12th grade secondary school; an education program at the juvenile detention facility; and the Academy, an alternative school for gang youth and those recently released from incarceration. All reservation students, including gang members, had no option but to be

in one of those three places. By merging all sources of education under one leadership with one mandate, a tribal idea was affected: eliminate barriers between people raising children, involve troubled kids in normal and important activities and establish a circle of adults that the most difficult youth could not escape from and who would support him until adulthood.

In Jail and on the Football Team

The following is an example of how one gang-involved teenager was kept in the tribal circle. We'll call him Louis. Louis started 9th grade as the youngest of several siblings, all of who were affiliated with gangs. He had been involved in fights and was rapidly developing a hardened gang persona. He had difficulty reading but showed aptitude for math and the potential for art and athletics. He had been recently expelled from an off-reservation junior high and served time in a county detention facility for car theft.

When Louis enrolled at the charter school, a planning meeting was held with administrators of the juvenile hall, the Academy, the school and Louis' parents. A consensus was reached that he should be on the football team, a neutral gathering where kids from different gangs could interact, become school heroes and develop an identity beyond the gang.

In addition to football, the Navajo vice-principal decided to enroll Louis in the school's art program that he himself taught. This would provide additional mentorship, self-discipline, Indian identity and a strong avenue for enhancing self-esteem.

Finally, the school counselor tested Louis for learning disabilities. This led to placement in a Native Studies and English track designed around reading improvement and special education support.

This plan initially proved successful. Louis passed courses, did well in football and received an honor before the community for both athletics and his good math grades. When he got into a fight on campus, he was sent to *New Directions*, a room where unruly students engage in an interactive lesson about tribal loyalty and what is expected of an Indian student. They then spend a period of days in academic seclusion with a stern Indian mentor.

During the second semester, L. got into another altercation, and when a teacher tried to break it up, he struck her. Under tribal law, this required incarceration.

The vice-principal and the teacher he assaulted visited Louis at the juvenile hall. Their purpose was to let him know that while he had earned incarceration, he was nonetheless still part of the school and the tribe and was not being abandoned. The teacher he struck expressed her continued faith in him, and Louis gave her an apology for

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Continued on page 10



his actions. A meeting was held that same week with a tribal judge, the Chief of Police and the director of the detention facility. The school requested that if Louis' behavior warranted it, could he be allowed to practice with the football team once a week and play on Friday nights. All agreed, and Louis' parents watched him excel at the homecoming game while his peers encouraged him to be responsible and stay on the team.

Louis continued his academic work via computer and an intranet and also participated in a horse therapy program, art classes and tutoring with a tribal elder while in incarceration.

In the spring, the charter school entered the tribal arts competition at the Heard museum, had a student art sale and produced a volume of student poetry. Incarcerated students also entered the competitions, had their own art sale, produced a literary magazine and put on a staged show of horsemanship for the community. Louis again contributed, experiencing what it was like to be a part something greater than himself that wasn't a gang.

Upon release, a team assembled to greet him and plan his entry into the Academy. His parents were there, as were opposing gang members. They were invited in order to get written and verbal understandings that there would be no conflicts when Louis returned to campus. Because several gangs are represented in the Academy, these transitional meetings addressed the issue openly and firmly. The meeting was positive, welcoming and clear as to expectations, standards and hopes.

Like all Academy students, Louis will participate in all the art, Native Study and athletic programs that are available to students in the regular high school program. He will learn to deal with opposing gang members who receive instruction in the same classroom and benefit from special education teachers in an affirming, structured environment. His parents will be called nightly to speak of progress or problems, and he will receive regular counseling, special field trips and special attention to learning and emotional disabilities. In time, he may exit the Academy and enroll in regular classes or choose to stay until he graduates.

This process of being planned for, followed and provided for will go on until Louis becomes an adult. While his behavior may require more or less contained and supervised settings, the option he does not have is to escape from the education, affirmation and discipline that are essential to becoming a contributing, self-sustaining adult. He will not be discarded, abandoned or shuttled between disconnected adults, even if he attempts to elicit this. The community will insist on raising him. The principal may have to visit him in jail, the coach could have to meet with judges, the community might need to apply all of its resources, but Louis will learn to read, receive awards, get a job, learn his history, study his language and use his gifts productively.

Conclusion

In 1995, I was fortunate enough to attend a series of community meetings on the Salt River Pima-Maricopa reservation. I would like to share a memory from that event that has come to represent a Native-American philosophy to me.

A powwow for community youth had been in progress, when I noticed that the chief of police was dancing in procession with an obvious gang member. The two had linked arms and were circling. I asked the man who invited me what that was about, and he answered, "*We can't send our youth away or blame someone else the way you can. They are a part of us.*"

At the end of the powwow, the chief of police stood with the chairman of the celebration and they gave a blessing, "*We pray for our children, including those who sleep tonight behind bars. We love them also.*" I could not imagine the Los Angeles Chief of Police sharing a sentiment such as this publicly, but it reflected a reality of Indian life. Gang members on the reservation were not the enemies, but the sons and daughters of the community. The gang taskforce meetings that followed the powwow were not cold conversations about suppression and longer sentences, but a communal sharing about how to best discipline, nurture, protect and involve the most lost and prodigal of their children. As cliché as it sounds, it still takes a village. The Pima-Maricopa know that and I believe their gang youth will have a much better chance than ours. ▼

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