

The Evolution of a Gang Member Through Trauma

There are many holes and misguidance when approaching the work of transformation in gang members. We are not here to glamorize or romanticize. Our goal is to change the mindset of the teachings and conversations behind this work. There is a list of misinformed teachings catered in gang intervention such as prison reform. There are inaccurate teachings that stem from an array of misinformed thoughts. Thoughts where jobs, schooling, monetary clout is what people think is needed and this to them means success. Unfortunately, they are only band-aids of the deep infection gang members must overcome.

I want to thank all who have done this work effortlessly and wanting nothing in return. My teaching comes from one source and one source only, and his name is Father Greg Boyle of Homeboy Industries.

I am a formally incarcerated gang member whose legal system tried giving me a life sentence in the California prison system.

My experience on this journey is sacred and personal and I am free to express it how I choose. I give my Higher Power the greatest gratitude for my creation. I seek nothing from what man can give me.

My goal is that people who choose to do this work will understand that this work is not of the mind. This work is of the heart. You cannot put the wagon before the horse. So, you cannot put the mind before the heart.

True transformation is from within, so the evolution of a gang member is treating the trauma from within. Clinicians and certifications from private institutions is not the way to heal the population of the disenfranchised communities where gangs and mass incarceration was created and still continues. Only the ones who have endured systematic oppression can spiritually articulate the healing that needs to take place.

How can you speak on the behalf of the pain if you have never felt the pain?

How can you teach others to be whole if you have never been whole?

The trauma gang members have undergone has never been researched thoroughly so the evolution has never been seen.

Through the decades, gangs have always been a hot topic in local and national news and Los Angeles has always been in the forefront. Gang violence in Los Angeles took its highest toll in the 1990s, however, the creation of it has been here since the 1940s.

This is no way to take a trip down memory lane. This information is to give you firsthand experience of what violence and trauma did to our society. This research is not solely based on facts, but it is presented in the most visceral way ever. I endured and survived trauma as a gang member in Los Angeles and lived to tell about it. My hope is that humanity can now truly understand the psyche of a gang member and the horrific circumstances that one had to endure just to exist.

Father Greg Boyle stated, "There is no hopeful child that becomes a gang member."

Trauma is defined as a deeply distressing or disturbing experience, and I am going to expand on that definition. There are a multitude of moments in my life that brought me extreme hardship that affected my spirit.

I was born in the early 80s like so many broken children in Los Angeles and even though raised different, the common ground was pain. There is no greater pain than the other and pain is the great equalizer.

PHASE 1

My abandonment by my father at the age of two would have me raised solely by my mother and I was an only child. My first trauma was the abandonment of my father. A parent naturally is supposed to be there for their offspring. There is a connection between parent and child and separating that distorts the connection.

No matter what the reason is, the void of a parent can be detrimental to a child. My father leaving when I was two years old affected my view of life. Why did he leave? What was much greater than me? When would he return? These are some of the obvious questions I believe a child who is abandoned feels.

The upbringing by my mother is where the next phase of events was introduced. A multitude of men came into my life as my mother's partners. With the absence of my father, my uncles were my male role models.

My uncles Carlos and Ernie were gang members and drug addicts. They were involved in gangs since the 1970s. They both started their incarceration as teenagers and continued eventually to land in the California prison system.

One of the memories that define my uncles was at the age of five. It happened one evening when I was asleep. I remember waking up to my mom screaming. I ran to the door and my mom is on the porch. My uncles are midway on a brutal attack upon each other. Blood flowing from both as they beat each other. My mother held me in her arms as they both savagely continued. The screaming from my mom mixed with fear came upon my innocent spirit.

Another key childhood moment happened one mid-day. I do not remember how we got to my aunt's house. I was around the same age as the first incident. I recall being in the middle of the front yard terrified beyond words. My uncle Paul was on the front yard drugged on PCP and out of his mind. My aunt Lilia was at the doorstep screaming at him. I had arrived there with my mom and my aunt Elva. His state of mind of being out of his mind made him attack my aunt. From one moment to the next, my mom and aunt Elva attacked him and dropped him to the ground.

PCP is a mind-altering drug that completely distorts all realities. It effects your mind and body, giving you the inability to conduct proper motor skills. I stood there panic stricken as my uncle Paul slurred obscenities to my mom and aunts. My mom screamed to my aunt Lilia to call the cops. I cried in terror as they struggled to hold him down until the cops finally arrived.

I do not want to let on that everything in my life was horrific. My mother showed me genuine care at times, but I believe the trauma I endured defined my upbringing.

My mother was dependent on filling her inner void with alcohol and searching for love through men. My mother cared more for the men in her life than she cared for me. Men that I would meet through my mother carried a multitude of facades, drug addicts, alcoholics, verbal, and physical abusers.

Mike was my mother's second husband and physical abuse was his forte. I was asked to go home for misbehavior at school and Mike picked me up because my mother was at work. When we arrived at the house, I was told to go to my room, and I did. In my ten years of existence, the symptoms of alcoholism were closely familiar, but violence was from a far. Mike came in the room and I knew things were not the same. You see Mike carried an entity of wrath and it came out from time to time. He said, "turn around." I had no idea why. What I did know is that the fear in my body was real. Before I could reply, he struck me with the metal buckle of his belt and he whipped me. It welted my skin and broke though. Within seconds, I laid on the floor in a defensive ball crying as it was over. The metal buckle of the belt had cut my face and I was bleeding. What had I done to deserve that? How in God's name was getting beat with a metal buckle okay?

Violence was my norm, my mom getting beat in the next room was my norm, and my childhood being infused with fear was my norm. I can tell you that I wanted to protect my mom from getting beat when I was thirteen years old. I can honestly tell you that when Richard, my mom's newest boyfriend, abused her in the next room, I wanted to save her. I would grab a metal bar and clutch it with my fist. I heard the screams from next door as I gripped the bar tighter and asked God to give me the strength to protect my mother, but he did not. I stood squeezing the metal bar until my fist turned white as tears streamed down my face. That thirteen-year-old boy cried for help, but nobody came.

Los Angeles is the home for over four hundred and fifty gangs and members range in the tens of thousands. Gangs were created in the subculture of Los Angeles as neighborhood groups like social clubs and fraternities. Like all urban groups, there is always a rivalry. Gang rivalries in the 1940s through the 1970s were exchanged through mutual combat. It was not until the 1980s when crack cocaine hit the streets that everything changed in these communities. With crack came money and with money came guns, and Los Angeles spiked in violence, drugs, and gangs. By the time I was a young boy, Los Angeles was ground zero for murders. The inner-city communities in Los Angeles were overrun by mayhem and death. In 1992, there were close to two thousand murders in Los Angeles. This is more than our military was killed that same year in war.

Twelve and thirteen years old is a critical year for young boys. It is during these years that they commence their rights of passage. In low-income communities, if you are not strong enough, you will continue to be the victim until you stop being the victim. Consciously and unconsciously society teaches that you must belong to a group like football teams, ethnic groups, religion, fraternities, sports team, etc.

There are hardly any positive outlets in the ghetto so children will join what is provided, especially the children that have endured the worst trauma.

The journey to join a violent gang was an easy bridge for me and thousands of others that suffered. The men in my life, my uncles, their friends and men outside the community, were gang members. My mother's absence made the transition easy.

PHASE 2

The joining of a gang is a decision the individual must make on his or her own. No one is forced to join the ranks. You must be a willing participant. The first part is the initiation. I willingly offered my physical being to be abused for the duration of the set time and fought back as I was expected. To join the gang, you must not show any weakness, and this was the first act of showmanship. My initiation in a gang is in no way showing that my upbringing as a child was stable. Why would a young innocent man choose to be violently attacked to feel they must belong to a gang? Yet, in the city of thousands of gang members, no one said anything. The generations that stood before understood this as their norm and so this young man embarked on the journey as a gang member. Trauma had been laid upon, stripped me of my innocence, and now the trauma would be self-inflicted.

In the 1990s, gangs in Los Angeles were filled with violence, drugs, and incarceration. There is no method to the madness, and they may come in various times or ways, but they all coincide with one other.

My first act of violence was upon someone who was the age of thirteen. My friend had been assaulted by another kid who was in school with him, and I went for retribution. My friends and I

waited for this young man to get out of school. As we spotted him, I approached him and told him what needed to be addressed, and he agreed to my challenge. We walked to an alley with both of our friends following. As we settled upon the place, we both stopped. What he did not know is that I was set to hurt him in a way he was not prepared for. As we stood in the center, my mind was locked and loaded. I wasted no time and struck him in the head. I had a master lock gripped in my fist and slipped it in my middle finger. The metal hit him square on top of the head and he fell like a log. Blood squirted from his head as he laid there. I stood in shock as the rest of the boys did also. This was the first time seeing the danger of violence upon a kid who was my age. In no way did I feel great about what had happened, but I believe this is what needed to happen in the world I was living in.

This phase is the introduction of the deep darkness. As young men, we begin conducting acts of violence upon others and ourselves. In the streets of gang culture, the more violent you are the more you are accepted. Also, people will have second thoughts about messing with you because they know you will fight back. It becomes one dark whirlpool of trauma.

All Los Angeles gang members have enemies. In the setting we were born, we all knew that getting assaulted or killed is part of the equation.

Coming out from intermediate school and hearing gun shots was something I vividly remember and easily accepted. Sammy was my best friend in junior high and at the young age of fifteen, he was incarcerated for murder. He shot another gang member in front of the gang member's mom and was sentenced to fifty-five years to life. Around the same time, I was also arrested for the first time and charged with robbery. I was sent to East Lake Juvenile Hall, which is the main jail in Los Angeles for youth offenders. Yet, through God's fate, the first night they had no housing beds but only the unit KL, the highest security for youth offenders and where the youth are fighting life sentences and waiting for trial. Felonies range from murder, home invasion, rape, kidnapping and they are all life sentences. The officers walked us in there late at night, and in the morning, we were set to leave. When they woke us up, I looked down the hall and I saw Sammy. He was still mid-way in his trial fighting his murder case. We laughed at the sight of each other. Our friendship was beyond these walls. To the common folk, we were gang members awaiting our fate, but to us, we were just youth dealing what life had given us. That was the last time I saw Sammy.

Being incarcerated as a youth is something that breaks your spirit on another level and there is no reform in jail. You find yourself a kid, age thirteen, fourteen, fifteen stripped from your home. I was locked in a cell and escorted with handcuffs behind my back. I would cry in those cells in the beginning but then realized no one was coming to save me. Gang banging and violence became amplified behind those walls with the fighting and riots being a regular appearance. Staff are there to keep order but there is no stopping the wrath of infused teenage trauma.

Juvenile facilities become a young gladiator school. Our minds begin forming our institutionalized future. There were hundreds of young men just like me and the majority black

or Hispanic. What I felt as an incarcerated youth is, I was not alone and that even though we may look different, there was a connection between us all. We talked similar, looked similar, and suffered the same. From juvenile hall and back to the streets was my revolving door and the fear of dying always was present on the streets.

In East Los Angeles, there were a multitude of gangs and most were enemies amongst each other. People getting shot on a regular occurrence was harsh but the reality.

The first gun I held was a .357 magnum that my neighbor asked me to hold when I was fifteen. Holding the power of that gun gave me the understanding of one of the most important street rules. Yes, the fear of death was real but with the power of my own firearm, I did not have to be the victim.

I was the victim since I was a young innocent child and being in the streets was potentially no different. There are always people on the streets waiting to take advantage of you. You must find your allies and find the inner strength to not be the victim or die.

Drugs play a common theme in the lifestyle and escapism is the only logical reason. The group of young friends that I ran with, at the time, were between the ages of thirteen and seventeen. We would spend night after night under the influence of drugs. It never dawned on me that anybody was looking for me at that young age.

One evening, seven of us stood out past the time we were to go home and none of us were able to go home after that. As midnight turned into one in the morning, we had to find a place to rest. On that cold night, we decided to jump the fence of a church. In the middle of the church, there was a park area with a couple benches. We all just wanted somewhere to rest, so we huddled around those benches and got comfortable. It was so cold that we all put our arms in our sweatshirts and balled up. Without saying a word, we all got closer to each other and used each one another for comfort and fell asleep. Why did seven young boys sleep on the street that night? For us this was all perfectly normal.

I believe drugs gave me the comfort of this cold world. I did not mind losing myself if my normal life was already upside down. The more I lost myself, the deeper down the hole I went.

I started smoking crack cocaine and meth at the age of fifteen. Psychotic thoughts and paranoia became my mindset, enhanced with the fear of dying by a rival gang member or going to jail for my illegal lifestyle. The damage had already been done and picking up the pieces was not an option at the age of fifteen. No one came to save me nor my friends, and the revolving door of death was the only thing constant.

One evening, my best friend Robert got into an altercation with another gang member in my presence. They decided to fight it out and before I knew it, Robert was hit with a blow that sent

him down. His head hit the pavement and he passed out, I called his name, but he did not answer. Within seconds, his mouth opened, and blood poured out. I was stricken mute because I didn't know what to do. The other gang members walked off as my friend laid in his own puddle of blood. I am grateful to God that he survived that day.

This story is the same story for thousands of decades of gang members. Trauma upon trauma as you continue to slowly kill yourself.

I had just been released after doing a couple months in the Los Angeles County jail. I was walking to my grandmothers and I only had been out for a few hours. As I reached the corner of my grandmother's, a SUV drove in front of me and blocked me. Two young male Hispanics were in the car, and I immediately knew my life was in danger. They asked me the most popular question gang members ask one another, "Where are you from?" This means what gang did I belong to. I told them and they made a remark disrespecting my gang and I responded by disrespecting their gang. In my mind, I was pretty sure they were going to shoot me because it was standard practice to have a weapon. As soon as the passenger got off the car, I ran the opposite direction. I flew full speed ahead waiting for the gunshots to go off, but nothing rang out. He was back in the car as their vehicle whipped around and chased me down the boulevard. It was an industrial area and there was nowhere to hide. I ran across the street again in the opposite direction. They followed me, but lost sight of me as I jumped a fence in a mechanic shop. I knew that they were still out there looking for me. I crouched in the darkness of the shop catching my breath as I listened for their vehicle. I heard nothing and decided to jump the back wall into the alley and continued my escape. The wall was too high, so I climbed on top of the wood pellets and jumped. I landed in the dark alley, looked to my left and then my right. Suddenly, high beams flicked on. Their vehicle was at the end of the alley and they were coming. There was no way to jump back because the wall was too high, but I attempted any way. I sliced my hands on the barb wire as I heard the engine getting closer. I started running for my life as their vehicle gained its engine max. I could see the end of the alley and in my mind, I knew that if I reached it, I had a chance to not die. Steps away from the end of the alley, I made it and then the car struck me. It hit my left leg and sent me tumbling to the floor but for whatever reason it did not keep me there. I jumped up as the car skidded past me and stopped. I could barely breathe from exhaustion, but I was going to start running again. I turned around and to my surprise the young man did not have a firearm. I stopped running. I had one shoe on and the other one was flung from the impact of the car. I could see that he was now going to fight me. I stood there and fought as best as I could until I was knocked out. I laid defeated and they left me there.

As I write these words, I ask myself, "Who would want to live like this?" I can honestly say is "No one." This is not living. This is running to death.

PHASE 3

When you think we have suffered enough, the suffering has just begun.

Screaming at the top of their lungs, Los Angeles County Sheriffs let everyone know who is running the show. They stripped us down butt naked and made us bend down, cough and spread our butt cheeks. If you did not listen to every instruction, you were screamed at and kicked to the back of the line. If you had a hint of aggression, you would be assaulted and restrained.

Unidentified trauma turns into the sickness.

The sickness of being a gang member in the California prison system starts with the self-segregation. Gangs are broken down by race in the system. Being Mexican, I automatically become a member of the Mexican prison gang. Countless people have been assaulted and died in the Los Angeles County jail. Again, there is no reform. The system is broken, and the atrocities continue.

By nineteen years old, I had done more time in the Los Angeles County jail then on the streets as an adult. As I awaited sentencing on a new case, I was sent to the disciplinary unit, "The Hole" for an infraction. "The Hole" was solitary confinement, one-man cell. The sheriff assigned me to my cell, and I walked down the tier to it. As I neared the end of the tier, I could see that coming from the cell floor was toilet water and it was clogged. I walked to the control unit and told the sheriff if he can house me in another cell. He said that he would move me as soon as he got a chance. The module was set in two tiers on top of each other. The cells were made up of bars so everyone could see and hear the conversation. Some of the inmates were saying not to go in the cell. "Aye youngster don't do that. They're going to leave you in there." I didn't want any problems with the sheriffs. I didn't want to be left in the cell with feces all on the floor. Again, I said in the most respectful way I could, "Can you just put me in another cell?" An inmate screamed from the top tier, "There's an empty cell up here!" The sheriff walked out of the control booth with two other officers. I could see in his approach that he felt challenged. He looked me dead in the eyes and said, "Go to the cell." As soon as I responded, "No," he struck me with his fist. It followed with two punches to his face and they begin to all attack me. They slammed me to the ground and that's when the pepper spray hit my face. The tiers went wild as they seen them taking advantage of me and kicking me until they finally cuffed me. I screamed in pain as the pepper burned my eyes. They picked me off the floor and escorted me to the cell. With blurry vision, I stepped into a puddle of feces as the cell door closed behind me.

Cruelty, dehumanization, call it what you will. There is no one to blame for this type of treatment. It is a regular occurrence in the Los Angeles County jail.

During this time, I was also housed in the gang module, a unit that houses its most active gang members. We are segregated with our own race. Within our own prison gang, there are regulations that are in place and if you sway from the rules, they can result in assault and death.

As a nineteen-year-old young man, my companions on the tier were older gang members and most were fighting life sentences such as murder, attempted murder and various high-profile

crimes. The evilness that is produced behind these walls is something I can never portray into words. In here, we all know that violence and murder happen behind these walls on a regular with the hierarchy of prison gangs and politics. We all know everyone can die if you are caught on the wrong side of things. What is bred behind the county jail walls is death. It ferments the sickest thoughts man can produce and lets them simmer until they finally pop. There is no sunlight, and everything revolves around violence. It is a birthing place for entities that only survive in the darkest lairs. Once you adapt to the situation, you accept the sickness and adapt to your own liking.

A young man whom I knew prior to the gang module had just been recently transferred a few days after me. We called him Bullet. He was housed in the top tier, and I was housed on the bottom tier. Because of our previous relationship, we would talk freely over the tier bars when we were able to. A week after our stay, there is a knock on my wall from my neighbor. He was an older gang member and he had the responsibility of being the main shot caller for the module. He was holding a folded-up note outside of my bars. I reached for it and opened it. It read, "Your boy is going to get hit on the next yard. Play like everything is cool." This meant that the next time they went outside for recreational, also known as the "yard," which was given once a week, they were going to stab him. I sat there not knowing how to respond. I didn't understand why I was even told. What was I to say? Who could I voice my opinion to? For the moment, I stuffed these emotions down. I knew if I said anything or warned Bullet, I would be the one to get stabbed. For the next two days, I talked to Bullet as if nothing had changed. We laughed and I pretended everything was normal as the shot caller heard me playing this game until Bullet's time was up. The next day, "yard" was called, and they all went out. As soon as the gate closed and the sheriffs escorted the top tier, the guys on the bottom laughed, "It looks like it's going to be a short yard today." Within fifteen minutes, we heard the metal clank of the gate opening, the top tier was coming back. They had stabbed him immediately when they were released up there.

What is it like to face a life sentence at the young age of twenty years old? This was my reality. I was charged with attempted murder for a gang shooting in East Los Angeles. Another gang member was shot, and I was involved. I stood in the county jail for a year with the reality that I might receive a life sentence.

Los Angeles convicts thousands of young men. Ten, fifteen, twenty-year life sentences. My situation was extreme, but it was not abnormal. Many of us were between the ages of eighteen to twenty-five years old fighting life. They were trying to give me twenty-five years for the shooting and ten years just for being gang member. My reality was that I may never get out of prison again. The journey of an innocent child, turned gang member, turned prisoner. As I sat there for a year fighting my case, these young men were getting life sentences.

Thumper was seventeen when he got arrested and was now twenty years old. They gave him fifty years to life for a shooting. Another received thirty-five years to life for a carjacking. All of us were black and brown. All of us were young and all of us were products of a system. There

were hundreds at that time that were getting these sentences handed out like candy. I took full responsibility for my actions, but I felt that I did not deserve to do thirty-five to life.

One evening, I sat in my cell on a tier with four other young men like me fighting life. We talked about the streets that night and what we missed. Food, girlfriends, fun, and one of the guys says, "You know what sucks? That I might never be able to cannon ball in a pool again." We all laughed and shared his enjoyment of a cannon ball. He was right. The simple things of life were going to get buried with our life sentences.

Mind, body and spirit, trauma becomes warfare. When I finally came to prison at twenty-one years old, the shock of the power it carried rippled through me. The Los Angeles County jail was its own beast but so was prison. There are over a thousand inmates on a prison yard with only a handful of guards. There are six towers surrounding the yard and every tower had an officer armed with an M-16 and painted on the wall was no warning shots. This means shoot to kill. Prison has the spirit of warriors. Everywhere you look men have killed and will do it again. But because of racial and prison politics, we live with each other as best we could until we try to kill each other again.

Two weeks into my prison sentence, an alarm goes off. We are to sit on our butts as officers run to stop an incident. We all look to see where it's going down at and I see two older men stabbing the hell out of another man in his neck. At my young age, I was not fully developed as these men that had been incarcerated ten, fifteen, twenty years. It was their strength as they repeatedly stabbed him in the neck that shook me. They finally stopped as officers intervened. In my mind, I knew that I must be strong to survive this.

This is not simply a memoir; this is to help you understand how horrific our experiences were. If a gang member is given a chance for a new life, he must dig up those darkest emotions to be a sane individual. What most gang members have underwent before they became gang members, we would not wish upon our worst enemy.

Toker, my celly in Lancaster State Prison, told me his father would be high on cocaine, tie his mother up and beat her in front of him and his younger sister.

So where do we start? As Father Greg says, "We are all a cry for help." To understand the gang member's trauma, you must be open to understand your own trauma. We are all in search of being liberated internally, so we must all internally free ourselves.

Do not judge, simply BE. Be available emotionally. Be available to listen. Be available to learn. Be available to evolve.

Do not listen with your ears, listen with your heart.

Gang members are the most marginalized individuals in our society. What they have had to carry would break most. But they live on. Scars, bullet holes, murdered friends and family, children lost in the system, years given to the prison system, they choose to live on.

Gang Members who have finally healed their trauma carry a message of hope.

All of our lives are interconnected. There is no one without the other. If I weren't a gang member, I would not be where I am at today. I am a message of hope.