
"The Price of Family"

By Luis Rodriguez

1) What to do with those whom society cannot accommodate? Criminalize them. Outlaw their actions and creations. Declare them the enemy, then wage war. Emphasize the differences -- the shade of skin, the accent in the speech or manner of clothes. Like the scapegoat of the Bible, place society's ills on them, then "stone them" in absolution. It's convenient. It's logical.

2) It doesn't work.

3) Gangs are not alien powers. They begin as unstructured groupings, our children, who desire the same as any young person. Respect. A sense of belonging. Protection. The same thing that the YMCA, Little League or the Boy Scouts want. It wasn't any more than what I wanted as a child.

4) Gangs flourish when there's a lack of social recreation, decent education or employment. Today, many young people will never know what it is to work. They can only satisfy their needs through collective strength -- against the police, who hold the power of life and death, against poverty, against idleness, against their impotence in society.

5) Without definitive solutions, it's easy to throw blame. For instance politicians have recently targeted the so-called lack of family values.

6) But "family" is a farce among the propertyless and disenfranchised. Too many families are wrenched apart, as even children are forced to supplement meager incomes. Family can only really exist among those who can afford one. In an increasing number of homeless, poor, and working poor families, the things that people must do to survive undermine most family structures. At a home for troubled youth on Chicago's South Side, for example, I met a 13-year old boy who was removed from his parents

after police found him selling chewing gum at bars and restaurants without a peddler's license. I recall at the age of nine my mother walking me to the door, and, in effect, saying: Now go forth and work.

7) People can't just consume in this society; they have to sell something, including their ability to work. If decent work is unavailable, people will do the next best thing -- such as sell sex or dope.

8) I've talked to enough gang members and low-level dope dealers to know they would quit today if they had a productive, livable-wage job.

9) If there was a viable alternative, they would stop. If we all had a choice, I'm convinced nobody would choose *la vida loca*, the "insane nation" -- to "gang bang." But it's going to take collective action and a plan.

10) Twenty years ago, at 18 years old, I felt like a war veteran, with a sort of post-traumatic stress syndrome. I wanted the pain to end, the self-consuming hate to wither in the sunlight. With the help of those who saw potential in me, I got out.

11) And what of my son? Recently, Ramiro went up to the stage at a Chicago poetry event and read a moving piece about being physically abused by a step-father when he was a child. It stopped everyone cold. He later read the poem to some 2,000 people at Chicago's Poetry Festival. Its title: "Running Away."

12) There's a small but intense fire burning in Ramiro. He turned 17 in 1992; he's made it so far, but every day is a challenge. Now I tell him: You have worth outside of a job, outside the "jacket" imposed on you since birth. Draw on your expressive powers.

13) Stop running.