

Interview with José Moreno about prison gangs

By Ines Aubert, February 2015

A prison gang is an inmate organization that operates within a prison system, that has a corporate entity, exists into perpetuity, and whose membership is restrictive, mutually exclusive, and often requires a lifetime commitment. (Wikipedia, 12.15.14)

José, although after 21 years on death row and having your death sentence overturned into life without parole, you still live in segregation like on death row. Is there the possibility to move to population where you would have more freedom? You told me that it would be dangerous for you there because of the gangs. Why so?

Before I answer your question about gangs, first let me tell you that gang members, whether they are active, inactive or ex-gang members, they generally avoid talking about gang activity.

You already know that I am in segregation because I am classified a member of a gang that the prison deems a threat to its security. I think you also know that I joined the gang in 1986 and that I broke the gang's biggest rule when I got out of the gang in 1998. The members of my former gang are obligated to attempt to kill me anytime they get a chance.

Is there a way for you to officially become an ex-gang member?

I can get out of segregation anytime I want by going through the GRAD (Gang Renunciation and Disassociation Program) program. It's only nine months long and once I complete it they will transfer me to a regular maximum security unit that has been cleared of as many active gang members as the prison administration could identify. But never all of them and new inmates arrive all the time.

No matter how hard the prison tries or how careful the prison is, there is always going to be gang members of my former gang that will slip past the screening on these special units. Sooner or later one of them will recognize me and if I don't see them first they will have the opportunity to catch me by surprise.

As crazy as this next part will sound, one of the many requirements of completing the GRAD program is that I must sign a document acknowledging that my life will be in danger but that I am still requesting to be placed in general population anyway and should I get killed I am absolving the prison of all responsibility. This is done to waive my family's right to file a lawsuit and sue the prison for not properly protecting me.

Physically, I am no longer in any condition to be defending myself. Even if no one ever recognizes me, can you imagine the paranoid wreck I will be constantly looking over my shoulder and carefully scrutinizing every inmate that could be a potential member of my former gang? That is not how I want to live.

Isn't there a way that you could be protected?

Sometimes there are many active gang members on these special units selected for graduates of the GRAD program. Then an ex-gang member arrives and immediately recognizes a threat to his life. Once he reports the threat to prison administrators, the only option that administrators have is to transfer the ex gang member to another special unit for GRAD. Then the ex gang member can try it again. Every unit can

treat the situation differently. Some units will wait until the ex-gang member is assaulted before transferring him. At this point, the only other option the ex-gang member has is to request to be placed in "safekeeping".

Safekeeping is a lesser form of protective custody. These inmates are housed in a separate building, they still work, go to the main chow hall to eat, and attend certain programs. However, they are assigned separate times, they are slightly isolated and a little more closely watched. Safekeeping is not the ultimate form of protection. Ex-gang members are assaulted and even killed while in safekeeping. After an ex-gang member is assaulted or an attempt is made on his life while in safekeeping, then the ex-gang member is invited to the ultimate protection: Protective Custody on the Ramsey Unit.

Ex-gang members in Protective Custody on the Ramsey Unit are completely separated from all other general population inmates and they do not mingle or interact with anyone other than other inmates in Protective Custody. These special inmates are housed in separated wings, they don't share a cell with another inmate, they don't work, they're not allowed to go to the craft shop, church services, vocational trades, schooling, and they eat their meals on their wings instead of going to the main chow hall. This is the place I wish I was assigned to. I just don't want to go through "attempts on my life" just to earn this privilege.

It's horrible to hear about the danger you're still in. Does that mean that ex-gang members still act as gang members?

I see many ex-gang members that can't make the complete transition to no longer being a gang member. All the time you spend in a gang you are constantly being brain-washed to think a certain way. It's a conditioning, the same way our armed forces train us to be soldiers, marines, airmen and seamen. No disrespect intended to our service men and women but gangs use the same brainwashing techniques to properly mold minds.

Once the classification department of the prison administration in Texas classifies someone as a gang member, they will be a gang member for the rest of their lives. The prison does not recognize ex-gang members in their classification process. Gang members are either active or inactive.

Successful completion of the GRAD program only gains the gang member his release from Administrative Segregation back into General Population and his classification status changes from an active gang member to inactive gang member.

The situation is similar with an ex-gang member's former gang. Nearly all gangs offer only lifetime membership. There is no such thing as retirement or having a change of heart. That is why upon initiation, a gang member is told that there is only one door out of the gang: death.

Similarly, a gang has only two types of status: good standing and bad standing. Good standing generally means "in favor or on good terms with someone". Bad standing is simply the opposite.

Can you tell me how many ex-gang members have gotten killed recently?

I don't know the exact numbers.

But the killings have declined dramatically. However, getting killed is not all one has to worry about. You see, gang members have an obligation to kill any member of their gang in bad standing. But nowadays you have a lot of gang members with small

prison sentences, like 5 or 10 years, and they really don't want to get a life sentence for killing someone and getting stuck in prison for the rest of their lives. So to keep from getting into trouble with their gang for not honoring their obligation to kill an ex-gang member, they will "attempt" to kill their former member by beating or stabbing them to within an inch of their life.

This whole gang policy seems so archaic to me: You have to kill an unknown person because he changed his mind with regards to his membership in the gang!

How was it for you to be a gang member?

It was not glamorous. I never sought out a gang life. When I got into the gang, I was barely 18 years old. In those two months that I had been in jail before being invited to join a gang, I had not seen any gang activity because I was so naïve and new to incarceration. I was blind to gangs. So when I was asked to join there was nothing serious about it to me. I have to add, however, that at that point in my life, even if all the serious consequences had been explained to me properly and I understood the situation I would be in, I was a reckless teenager, destined to be executed by the state. I would not have cared and I would have still made the same decision. Dumb on top of stupidity. I basically joined a gang because I didn't care about consequences and because it further advanced my desire to cause injury and destruction.

The initiation process to become a gang member is basically an investigation to verify one's reputation and determine that the initiate has never had any criminal charges of a sexual nature, particularly rape or anything involving children. During this stage the initiate is called a "prospect". While the process can last for years, there is a minimum period of six months. My propensity for violence and destruction in the county jail ushered me through this process in barely eight months and I became a full-fledged member of my former gang right around my 19th birthday.

The whole time I was pretending to be someone I wasn't in order to fit in. I was constantly under a lot of stress because I was always involved in a potentially deadly game of gang politics. When I left the gang it was like a huge burden taken off my shoulders.

With time I started to learn how serious this gang thing was so I started playing my part accordingly. After some years I stopped caring because everything changed.

The guys that brought me into the gang I barely knew for less than a year.

When I got to death row I met a whole new group of "brothers". These guys were really good people. True brothers I would have died with or for if necessary. This was that golden period of my membership when everything was perfect.

Things changed when we got a new leader. We went from a group of four members to a total of 16 members on death row. The new leader started recruiting new members in order to boost numbers. New people I shared nothing in common with. Of the original four members, two had already gotten executed. To make matters worse, of all the guys that brought me into the gang in 1986, most had been killed (by our own gang) and all the ones that were still alive were all in bad standing.

All of the new generation of gang members were strangers to me. I was in an in-gang power struggle with the leader and it was all too stressful for me. I started to see his treacherous plans to have me destroyed.

That realization frightened me.

Here I am playing my part of being a gang member, which is something I didn't have my heart into, and it was all for nothing because I had no emotional attachment to any of the members that remained.

By gang rules, if one of my brother's life is in danger then I have to do everything I can to save him or die with him. But there was nobody left that I would want to die for or with. I was in a situation in which I was disgusted, frightened, and I wanted out. So I got out.

José, this is all somehow unbelievable to me. It reminds me of another world, one that only exists in films. It's hard for me to believe that at one point you were part of that world.

What have you learned from your activity in the gang?

I definitely learned how to become a better criminal. It's not something I'm proud about but it's the truth. For those years until I got out of the gang in 1998, I manipulated people, I lied to people, I used people, I participated in the plotting of killing other inmates, and I did other things I am ashamed of. That was not who I used to be when I was a teenager and that is not who I am now.

It was a dark period in my life and it took nearly two weeks after getting out of the gang for the realization to finally sink in, that I was my own man again. No longer part of a gang regardless of how that gang sees it or how the classification department of the prison sees it. It was like a huge burden was lifted off of my shoulders and I could finally begin to live my life like who I really am.

There are a lot of things going through my mind when I learn these things about gangs. There seem to be not only inmates who killed in the past but also those who would kill in the present if only they had the chance.

Without a doubt, some would kill YOU if they had the chance, and you are a friend of mine. That is very scary to me.

What do you suggest we pen pals base our commitment on when we are writing to inmates who are ready to kill an ex-gang member today or tomorrow? We definitely can't say that the killing is part of his past and that he is rehabilitated.

First of all, there are not many gang members on death row. The odds are low that someone from lifespark is writing to a gang member. Secondly, gang activity is serious business to gang members. Nothing, not even the blood family they were born to comes before the gang. With this in mind, know that your friendship with this pen pal gang member can never go beyond the bond they have with their gang – unless they leave the gang.

So, don't expect them not to kill again, no matter what they say.

Is there something you want to say to the pen pals of gang members?

There is a growing trend of gang members leaving their gangs. I have seen many active gang members make the decision to leave their gang.

Some gang members simply don't know how to go about leaving their gang. If you have a pen pal that expresses his desire to leave a gang, treat it as a very important and critical procedure that you may be able to help with. Sometimes all it takes is a little positive encouragement. At the same time, if they have no intention of leaving the gang, do not take it as a challenge to convince them otherwise.

Let me ask you a last question: How would I realize that you are not right now manipulating and using me as you've learned that so well while being a gang member?

Unless you are a manipulative person by nature or you received special training to detect manipulation, then you'll never really know for certain. 😊

Thank you for all the very interesting information you shared with me, José. I wish you all the best.