

THE GANG TRAP TOGETHER, TEENS SEEK ANOTHER WAY

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Seventeen-year-old Rosalva stares at Henry, 16, and confronts him in quiet, measured tones.

"You were walking down the street the other day throwing down signs at people you don't even know," she said. "Don't you know what could happen to you, stupid?"

Henry shrugs sheepishly. He doesn't want to admit he was flashing hand signals at passing cars, pretending he's a member of a gang.

"You could end up dead, Henry," Rosalva said.

She ought to know. She has lost two cousins who were gang members, one gunned down outside a McDonald's, the other shot in a gas station.

On a cold night in southwest Detroit, 18 teenagers sit in the basement of the YMCA on Clark Avenue, snapping gum, giggling and challenging each other on the hard realities of their lives. Several are former gang members; nearly all have attended funerals of young relatives and friends who were in gangs, and three admit they are still in one of the 50-odd street gangs that haunt this part of the city. None wanted a last name used.

But all of these teenagers are fighting back -- fighting to make hard choices in their own lives and to help each other. Under the direction of Yolanda Salazar, a counselor with the Wayne County Youth Assistance program, they have formed their own group: Teens Reaching Out (TRO).

They have gone on field trips -- including skiing for the first time in their lives. They held a Valentine's Day dance. They are trying to raise money to go to an anti-gang convention in Florida in May.

The heart of the program for these teenagers is hanging out, which is what their counterparts do on street corners. But a few hours listening to them reveals a fundamental difference. In these voices, there is hope, however haltingly expressed. These kids believe they have a future.

As many as three evenings a week, they sit for several hours at the basement table, sharing painful memories, but also daring each other to change, to believe in themselves.

"Hey, if you want to be an astronaut, do it. Be the first Mexican on the moon," Mark, 17, says on a recent Wednesday night.

The others burst into laughter at his suggestion, but he persists.

"Everyone here knows gang members, but that's not the only thing there is in southwest Detroit," Mark says. "I want to see some kids putting back into the community."

Mark admits he was a gang member and lived by the deadly codes of the street. He says he was scared of being perceived as a nerd and was fascinated by the older boys who wore special colors, used a different language and appeared to have it all.

By age 11, he was tagging around after them. By age 16, he was watching them get thrown in jail or die.

Finally, he went to upstate New York for a year, to get away from the gangs. A week after he returned, his childhood best friend, Robert Parizon, who was never a gang member, was shot dead in Patton Park. An 18-year-old member of the **Detroit Kings**, Eli Ramirez, is in jail charged with murder, awaiting trial this summer.

Mark says he doesn't know what he would have done two years ago to avenge his friend's killing. But now, he has retreated from the endless cycle of violent retribution.

In the game of hide-and-seek the gangs play, members of one gang shoot at or throw a brick through the window of a rival's home, and the rival gang returns the fire.

"Today, there's no forgiveness," says Tanya, 17. "It just goes back and forth, back and forth, and it never ends."

Still, the teenagers are frank with each other about the allure of the gangs.

"It was like a natural high, I have to admit it -- living on the edge, standing on the street corner having fun and games," Tanya says. "But I saw what it was doing to my mother. . . . Sometimes I miss it, but I control it."

One of the hardest things about being a teenager in southwest Detroit is fighting negative stereotypes they say police, the media and many adults in their community have formed about them. One in eight kids is in a gang in southwest Detroit, but seven out of eight are not.

"Three, four years ago, my friends and I used to ride our bikes down to the park and just hang out," said Mauricio. "I went down there the other day and people were looking at me. They see a young Latino. For all they know, I'm a murderer."

Mauricio, 16, has never been in a gang, and says he never will be. He and the others, especially the young men, said they are stopped incessantly by police and questioned. Mauricio constantly challenges the other TRO members to come up with constructive, positive images and actions.

The others say that's hard, but they are trying.

Says Monica: "Every time you walk down the street, the only thing anyone says is, 'Who you down with?' " -- meaning of which gang is she a member. "I just get so sick and tired of it. You go out to the malls, they see you're Latina, that's all they say to you. Why don't they say, 'What's your name?' instead?"

Salazar asks the kids what they say now when they are asked, "Who are you down with?" "Myself," says Monica.

Mark has some final thoughts at the end of the session.

"They say the only way out of a gang is dead. I think that's a lot of bull. . . . I've come this close to getting smoked. I value my life now."

Mark doesn't blame his family for his gang activity and a sometimes violent past. "I'm not going to lie and say I came from a broken home, or I ate rocks for dinner. I made my own choices and I made poor choices."

He is trying to earn his high school equivalency diploma, and dares to dream of becoming a zoologist or a family counselor. "I know what I want. I'm just not sure how I'm going to get there," he says.

Salazar was asked whether someone like Pablo Bonilla, the **Detroit Kings** leader who says he wants to give up the gang life, could join TRO.

"We welcome all kids," she said.

Caption: Photo GEORGE WALDMAN

: At a recent meeting at the YMCA on Clark Avenue, members of Teens Reaching Out compile a list of their concerns. The group, which is under the direction of a counselor, gathers regularly to talk about halting the gang violence that has cost nearly every member a friend or relative.

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