THE GANG TRAP AT AGE 19, 'I'M A MARKED MAN'

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He looks like any other teenager.

But Pablo Bonilla is self-proclaimed head of the **Detroit Kings** , until recently one of the city's fastest-growing gangs.

"They call my street my kingdom," he says matter-of- factly. By last summer, he was the mastermind of a gang 100 members strong.

From Junction to Woodmere Cemetery, from Springwells to Green, Bonilla's nickname, "Looney Tunes," and the D-Kings' crown dribble crazily across vacant houses, garages and store walls, battling with rivals' war cries spray-painted onto the everyday reality of southwest Detroit.

But the swagger is gone from Bonilla's walk. The massive gold rings have been stripped from his fingers. He glances back constantly as he talks.

Just 19 and facing federal drug charges as one of two dozen gang leaders swept up in a Feb. 22 raid, he worries his life may be over soon.

"I'm a marked man. If they killed me, they would throw a big party down here in southwest Detroit," he says. "I'm trying to get out, but I don't know if I can."

Bonilla says he is growing up, and the D-Kings are shutting down. Wary community leaders, scornful cops and rival gangs aren't so sure.

"He's a con man, a real good talker," said Inez DeJesus, cochair of the Anti-Gang Violence Coalition in southwest Detroit. She adds: "I can't help but think, 'poor kid.' "

Bonilla is one of an estimated 800 youths in 50 gangs that now roam this side of the city, police say. Using the census and police numbers, that means nearly one in eight youths ages 12 to 21 is in a gang in the small area roughly bounded by Michigan Avenue, Woodmere Cemetery, I-75, and West Grand Boulevard.

Driven by fear, a need to belong, and a desire for something to call their own -- even a street corner -- hundreds of teenagers fashion deadly empires out of adolescent desires. For these kids, getting a gun and being initiated into a gang replace getting a driver's license and a high school diploma.

In this area, the high school dropout rate is 36 percent, nearly double the Detroit average. Median household income is $13,500, about $5,000 lower than the citywide figure. Of teenagers 16 to 19 not in school, fewer than one-third have jobs. Some are mothers staying home with their babies. Most are on the street with nowhere to go.

"The bottom line with these kind of gangs is the futurelessness that looms over kids in cities," said Elliott Currie, a sociologist at the University of California- Berkeley who has interviewed hundreds of gang members around the country.

That sense of futurelessness makes young people intent on keeping what what they think is theirs. Week after week, the Latin Counts, the Cash Flow Posse, the Cobras, the D-Kings and other gangs shoot, stab, throw bricks at and pummel each other with fists and baseball bats in a bloody bid to establish boundaries and identity.

"The kids feel whoever is the strongest will persevere," said Renee Ferris, director of youth nonviolence training at New Detroit. "If you're too weak, someone will get you."

Some end up dead, some in prison. Others try, painfully, to grow up. Haunted by past rivals, hunted by newer, younger gang leaders, and inheriting a region with fewer and fewer jobs, it is a tough proposition.

Bonilla's path to gang leadership began at age 16. He saw two older teenagers in Latin Counts garb beating two of his friends in a car on Vernor, southwest Detroit's bustling main drag. When Bonilla walked over, he said, one attacker stuck a gun in his side. The other told him, "Get lost or I'll kill you."

Bonilla walked away, badly shaken.

"I started the Kings after that, pretty much for protection," he said. Before that, Bonilla had been just another bright city kid. His divorced mother, Victoria Rivera, raised her three sons alone. She says Pablo, her youngest, was a good student at Southwestern High School until 10th grade, when he dropped out.

Rivera, who has remarried, prides herself on having kept food on the table and a neat house. Her living room is crowded with baby pictures and other family mementos.

She speaks wistfully of when her sons went to carnivals and birthday parties. Just five years ago, Pablo played an angel in a church Christmas pageant.

Now, she realizes he has hurt people and terrorized the neighborhood. In February, her oldest son Luis was convicted of second-degree murder, possibly gang related, although his family says he is innocent. Her middle son, Carlos, is in the gang but less involved.

"I can't cover the sky with my hand," she says wearily. The saying in Spanish means that the facts are as hard to cover up as the sun in the sky.

Bonilla said he, his cousin Francisco Mercado, and two lifelong friends, Eli Ramirez and Romero Arias, originally banded together as deejays for birthday parties and dances.

They became the first **Detroit Kings** , with Bonilla as the head King.

Writing the rules

Like boys in a tree house plotting club rules, he and the others drew up their rules. They copied rules from established gangs, including initiation rites, graffiti codes and burial rites.

"One thing you've got to remember at all times is they're kids. . . .," Currie said. "All this stuff about having secret hangouts and secret words and initiations, it goes on in college fraternities; it goes on in secret societies at Yale. If George Bush can go through Skull and Bones, these kids should be able to have a sense of identity and belonging, too."

Bonilla said he chose the name **Detroit Kings** because he was told his absent father had been a Latin King gang member in Chicago. The new gang's colors were blue and white.

Within two years, membership soared and the D-Kings became active in the violent street game.

Bonilla grew used to having guns aimed at him, to ducking below a steering wheel and driving blindly, to planning "bucks" and "burns" -- fights and drive-by shootings -- for his members. The street door to his upstairs flat is off the hinges, broken by police with a battering ram as they executed search warrants. "They come so many times, I just leave it like that," Bonilla said.

Selling drugs

The gangs sometimes get money by selling drugs and guns.

Bonilla won't talk about that. But two members who didn't want to be identified said it's easy.

"You get a job at McDonald's for a week, just to get quick cash -- even $50," said one. Then you buy enough marijuana or crack cocaine to sell on a corner staked out by your gang. You save your profits, and buy more within days. A fellow gang member sells half, returns the upfront cost, and you buy and sell even more. "You can earn $1,000 a day real easy," he said.

In the same gang, members said a 26-year-old with federal gun dealer permits in Michigan and Florida bought guns, scratched off the serial numbers and reported them stolen. Gang members hustled them along with drugs. Other guns came from burglaries or were unloaded on Detroit street corners after shootings in Ohio, Illinois or elsewhere, gang members said.

For many gangs, drugs and guns are just a profitable sideline to the real thrill: a vicious and violent game of hide-and-seek.

The more rival gang members are beaten, shot at, or killed, the bigger your "rep," say former and current members.

Bonilla says he repeatedly sought out rivals on their turf and flashed Folk Nation hand signs at them, challenging them.

"I had to build my name," he says. He marvels at how quickly streets he walked without fear as a child became enemy territory, where guns were fired when he drove by.

Bonilla says he used only fists when a rival gang member invaded his turf. Rivals and victims say he used all the weapons of gang warfare.

"To have boundaries is to own something," says Currie. "It's no accident to have such violent defense of possessions in places where kids have nothing more than a street corner."

'A gun feels like power'

Bonilla won't talk about the worst things he has done. But he and gang member Paul Tellings express no remorse about rival gang members who died violently.

"Not after what they did to other people, nope, I don't feel bad for them," Bonilla.

"They was in too deep," said Tellings.

Tellings talked with adolescent honesty about why he likes a gun.

"A gun feels like power, like you can control someone else's life and your own," he said. "It makes you feel tingly. It's like wow, it's power, and I can control it."

On a homemade tape of original rap songs, Bonilla and other gang members boast about killing, maiming and taunting rivals and, occasionally, innocent bystanders.

"His nine went click; my nine went clack; innocent Miss Daisy took a bullet in her back," they chant about two rivals firing 9mm guns at each other and killing a woman by accident in a song called "Driveby Miss Daisy."

Other raps brag of attacking rivals: "All you . . . better call for the ambulance, you know what I'm saying?"

Currie says that gang members talk tough to build up their reputations, but it doesn't necessarily mean they committed the violence. On other songs, gang members talk of maiming and killing rivals.

The danger of violence-laced rap songs, Currie says, is that they legitimize the desire to hurt or kill.

In December 1991, as the gang was becoming established, Bonilla was charged with assaulting Gerald Deece across the street from the Fourth (Fort-Green) Precinct police station.

Deece said Bonilla challenged him because he was wearing blue and black, the colors of the rival Cash Flow gang.

Deece protested that he wasn't in a gang, but he was hit over the head with a baseball bat from behind. As he crawled bleeding into a Fort Street party store, another youth allegedly stole Deece's car.

Deece fingered Bonilla as his assailant and testified at a preliminary hearing. But after a visit from Bonilla's oldest brother and mother, he changed his mind. On Jan. 8, 1992, he refused to continue to press charges, and they were dropped.

Bonilla says he never touched Deece, that he first met him in court. But he says he deserved to be in Wayne County Jail while waiting for trial, because of other things he had done. He says he prayed and talked for hours to his pregnant girlfriend, worried he would miss his child's birth.

On Feb. 19, 1992, a few weeks after his release from jail, Bonilla watched his daughter being born at a hospital.

"It was the greatest thing I ever seen," he said.

Bonilla said he tried to ease out of the gang last spring. For the first time, he was thinking about the future: a home for his daughter. But he found quitting was harder than he thought.

One day, he was walking alone. A car pulled up, the passenger window rolled down, and a shotgun was aimed at his chest, he said.

"I picked up a rock and started walking toward them. I was yelling 'Go ahead, shoot me, shoot me, come on,' " Bonilla recalls. "They rolled up the window and drove away. I guess that's why they call me the lucky one."

Mother couldn't control him

Bonilla slid back into the gang. He moved into a two- family house his mother owned, telling her he needed a place for his girlfriend and baby.

Victoria Rivera speaks wearily about her efforts to keep her son off the streets, out of a gang, and in school. Commuting hours to and from a Toledo factory job five days a week, Rivera says she just couldn't control him.

"You run out of energy. I tried, but I just couldn't do it," she said.

Currie says most people wrongly assume all gang members are runaways or children of abuse. The most common pattern he has seen is "a single parent, usually a mother, struggling to keep a roof overhead by working long hours, usually a law- abiding adult who, if they were there, would keep the kids out of trouble. But they can't be there."

Rivera says she let her son move into her other house with conditions: that he get a job, help pay the taxes and utility bills, and get on with his life.

Instead, Bonilla admits he and his brother Luis went to Toledo "to recruit." He was back into running the D-Kings full-time. Summer was approaching, federal agents had busted two dozen Latin Counts, and there was a power vacuum on the streets.

Bonilla and his brother walked around to pool halls and bars, and talked to runaway kids. By July, Bonilla had set up a semi-barracks, semi-party house in his mom's property on West Lafayette, according to police. One of the recruits was Tellings, a runaway from Cleveland.

Tellings speaks with fierce loyalty bordering on adoration about Bonilla: "He is my brother. I wouldn't have no family if I wasn't here."

Tellings said he is also reassured by the gang rule that promises a decent burial. He wants the gang to place a 40-ounce bottle of St. Ides beer and a pack of Newport cigarettes in his coffin.

Tellings avoids thoughts of the future. "I just take it one day at a time," he said. "Whenever I try to think about the future, the present gets all screwed up"

In July, the present got very screwed up.

Eli Ramirez, Bonilla's quiet, chubby childhood friend, got drunk one night at the West Lafayette house. According to court testimony from Bonilla, a young woman named Dawn Holmstrom and others, Ramirez borrowed a sawed-off shotgun and drove by Patton Park, where dozens of kids were hanging out on a warm night.

He ordered Holmstrom to roll down the window and fired into a crowd of kids, police charge. Robert Parizon, 17, never a gang member, was killed.

Ramirez is scheduled to stand trial on murder charges this summer.

In August, Eli's father wept on his front steps as he described battling for two years to keep his son from Bonilla.

Community activist Yolanda Salazar of Wayne County Youth Assistance says it is not so hard to get out of a gang as many young people believe.

"Just change one set of friends for another," she said.

Sociologist Currie says it is crucial to remember that most teenagers, no matter how tough, are open to positive change.

"Kids' attitudes are very volatile; they can change very quickly," he said. "They're really not vicious, cold-blooded killers. They can change overnight to something very constructive."

The missing key, Currie says, is economic opportunity.

"It's harder and harder to find a legitimate line of work, and that's how people used to get out," he said. "In Chicago, kids got out of the gangs by going to work in steel mills. Those jobs aren't there anymore."

Jobs with a good future aren't easy to come by in Detroit anymore, either. In this part of the city, the Fisher body plant has closed. Only one downsized shift remains at the Clark Street Cadillac plant, and that, too, is slated to close.

Growing up someplace like southwest Detroit, "what there is for you is pretty skimpy," Currie said. "Until and unless we begin to really put our money where our mouth is in terms of job opportunities, early education, a national employment policy -- until we do that, we're just swimming upstream."

A report by the Eisenhower Foundation in Washington, D.C., for the Clinton transition team cited the importance of jobs, but said the most successful efforts at keeping youths out of gangs have included many components.

The report cited the need for a strong extended family, mentoring, social support, discipline, educational innovation that motivates young people to complete high school and continue to college, and job training and placement.

Awaiting trial

On Feb. 22, Bonilla was one of 24 gang leaders arrested in the second major sweep by police, who are trying to clean the gangs out of the southwest side.

Bonilla faces trial later this year for allegedly selling less than a gram of cocaine to a federal agent. Meanwhile, he is back in his neighborhood, back in his mom's other house, happy to be in a second-floor flat. "It's harder to shoot up to the second floor windows," he says. "I got a baby girl. I don't want nothing to happen to her."

His mother says he is penniless. He talks vaguely about getting a high-school equivalency diploma. A carload of young men keeps guard at the front door.

Bonilla says he wants to get a job as an electrician, to raise his daughter in a world free of gang violence and to live a peaceful life. He says he may have to leave Detroit to accomplish it, if he is not sentenced to prison.

Many don't believe his talk. "They all say they're getting out every time we pick them up," said one Fourth Precinct cop.

But Bonilla says he means it.

"The best thing I ever tried to do in my life," he says, "is getting out of this gang."

Caption: Photo GEORGE WALDMAN

: "If they killed me, they would throw a big party down here," says Pablo Bonilla, a gang leader. Just five years ago, he played an angel in a church Christmas pageant. Gang-related graffiti dots southwest Detroit, where police estimate 800 youths belong to gangs. "It was like a natural high . . . living on the edge," said one former member who found the strength to leave. Pablo Bonilla, 19, stands in the doorway at his mother's Detroit home. Victoria Rivera said her youngest son was a good student at Southwestern High School until he dropped out in the 10th grade.

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