Coming Home from War in the Neighborhoods—Leaving Gang Life

Interview with J.G. by Silja Kallenbach

What’s it like being in a gang?
I joined the gang Crips at 12, and I was the youngest member at the time. I got out just before I turned 16. Being in a gang makes you put up emotional barriers where you don’t let anybody in. Gang members don’t value their own lives or the lives of others. They expect to die. The mentality I had was that I was going to die.

The gang became my family. I was willing to kill for them with no hesitation or remorse. You’re in the battlefield every day. You know that at any moment you can have a gun to your head. You have to gain your rank. They send you on missions fighting, stabbing—you have to prove you’re ruthless. It’s like being in a pool of sharks.

It sounds worse than war.
Once you’re in a gang, only very few come back from it. If you go to war as a soldier, at least you have feelings of love for your country. In a gang, you just have negative emotions that gangs use to make people into brutal killers.

Why do people join gangs?
We are all afraid to be alone. When you feel hopeless or angry that’s what gangs take advantage of. You want to know if you die, at least someone thought you did something right. It’s an unbelievable psychological manipulation that can make people do things you can’t even imagine. Normally, you look at a human being and think you could never harm or kill them.

What was the turning point for you?
Surprisingly enough: love. I met someone who became very close to me and showed me there was something else to live for. In a gang all you do is to focus on negative emotions that cloud your judgment. Love and hope help you overcome those emotions.

What’s the hardest thing about leaving a gang?
The hardest thing is that you lose any sense of self and your innocence. You don’t know how to get on the right path because you’ve been on the wrong path for so many years. You forget how to live a normal life. You don’t know how to start the process of self-cleansing.

How have you managed to stay out of gangs?
You have to look for a reason to keep on. I focus on work and school, and I stay out of the streets. I expect to graduate from high school this year. I want to go to college and maybe join the U.S. Marine Corps.

My school—an alternative high school in Boston—was an unbelievable opportunity for me. In other schools you have 30-40 kids in a class; you can’t get the attention you need, and you have all these teenagers from different gang nations. You have wars at the school. This school is like a close knit family. The teachers call you, visit you. You can tell it’s not just their job. They’re always there for you. It’s a special school.

What’s the poem “Vicious Cycle” about?
It explores the deep emotions in all of us. It’s for everybody. Even though you can hit rock bottom there’s always space for you to rise up. There’s always love and hope and reason to stay around.

J.G. is a pseudonym. He left his gang a year ago and is currently a senior at an alternative high school in Boston. Silja Kallenbach is the director of the NELRC.