

Fighting gangs with GANAS

Change-oriented program
offers youths alternatives

BY DAN WHITE
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Outside on the streets of Watsonville, they might throw signs or flash the colors of their gang. They might "mad dog" or threaten each other.

But the young people in GANAS — Gang Alternatives North and South — put aggression aside when they meet for informal weekly rap sessions. And when it's over, they stand and shake hands.

Some people go to GANAS by choice. Probation officers send others. They range from early teens to weathered veterans.

Most are involved with gangs or trying to avoid them or just want to share their problems, from family conflict to peer pressure.

Conflict resolution and personal change are group goals. Meetings are moderated by GANAS founder Albino Garcia Jr.

In his hands-on approach, he is respectful but often blunt. "How did it feel when you lied to your mother?" he asked one young man.

Garcia also checks on their progress, from the teen-ager who is battling with his mother over pot smoking and partying to a girl struggling to resist a fight. "You can't come in here putting one over on anyone because we've all been there," Garcia said.

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GANAS offers young people alternatives to gang life

Conflict resolution and personal change are program's goals

■ GANAS

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The program is funded with grant money through Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance, a non-profit organization that supports drug and gang intervention programs within the Pajaro Valley Unified School District. Garcia is a gang and drug counselor working with area high schools, in juvenile halls and with migrant families.

"This gang stuff is only a symptom, just like drugs," Garcia said. "Oppression, racism, abuse at all levels — those are the real issues. This is the coping mechanism for many of them."

Nearly all at GANAS — Spanish for "desire" — know the

hopelessness and lack of opportunity that drive many to join gangs.

GANAS meets on the grounds of New School in Watsonville, which is a program within the Pajaro Valley Unified School District for those who have been out of school for at least 45 school days because of poor grades, attendance or behavior.

Allen Sowell, a teacher at New School who helps out at GANAS meetings, knows many Watsonville teen-agers who don't imagine they'll be alive in five years. "You talk to a 15-year-old, and he says, 'It's over for me. I just pray to God to take care of my mother.' I say, 'You're only 15 years old.'"

"You'll see 13-year-old kids already messing with that lifestyle, already with guns in their hands," said Tomas Alejo, a GANAS facilitator. "Go to juvenile hall. They're shipping them in, 13, 14 years old."

"There are a lot of people from the barrios, and not too many go

the street. That's to be expected at first," said Garcia, who also works at Barrios Unidos in Santa Cruz, a non-profit organization that works with barrio youth. "But if we can change that for one or two hours a week ... that's a start."

Garcia, 32, grew up in a Chicago housing project, in a large family where drug use was rampant. "Tragedy was a very common thing," he said. "My cousin committed suicide. Two close family members OD'd on heroin. I've seen people shot, people stabbed, my father's head bleeding from a confrontation. That's the kind of scenery I had growing up."

Garcia founded the group two years ago. In each session, he asks people the high and low points of the week. In a recent session, a young woman mentioned a murder.

The victim, a friend, lived in the barrio and didn't "play the game," but got shot anyhow. "He didn't deserve what happened to him and I'm tripping on it," she

said. "I was thinking about all the people who went to his funeral. I wondered if anyone would go to my funeral."

Alejo was part of a gang and spent most of his teen-age years in jail, in rehab centers, in juvenile hall. "You think they're your friends," he said. "All those people you've been rolling with kind of abandon you in tough times. My mom, she never gave up on me. She was there every visit day."

Because he had violated the terms of his probation so many times, Alejo faced a possible five-year prison term. "I looked back at my years wasted. I said, I'm tired of this. No more." He prayed. "I said I don't care if I get sent up to prison, just help me change." He found hope in spirituality.

"I believe in a power up above," he said. "I do with all my heart."

Spirituality is an avenue of change for many people in GANAS, Garcia said.

One young man at the meeting said he could be out with friends,

but when they passed a church the swearing stopped suddenly.

"I can't say I know everything about leading life and believing in God," the youth said. "Maybe what I'm doing at the time is wrong. But to me it's out of respect. Sometimes, it makes me think, 'What am I doing?'"

"I tell them there is a lot of power in that," Garcia said. "In the spirit, in that part of your cultura."

At the meeting, a young man who hadn't said a word spoke up when the talk turned to spiritual power. "You don't hear about this when you're with your homeboys," the youth said. "Even though you're thinking of doing something stupid, Diosito (God) is always gonna be there. That's what trips me out."



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