

# Former delinquent says respect is how to reach gang members

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When one-time juvenile delinquent Debbie Martin got into fights, her aim was to draw blood.

"I wanted to hurt somebody like I hurt," Martin, now 31, told more than 100 people attending yesterday's Latino Network luncheon in Salinas while discussing the subject of Paint Busters, former gang members and associates turned civic volunteers.

For about 15 minutes, Martin's gritty voice chronicled her youthful descent into the criminal world and her emergence a decade later as the founder of the band of adolescents.

Under her direction, gang members have played Santa Claus, cleaned the homes of the elderly and participated in mock trials. At last count, about 20 of the members were enrolled in the explorer's program of the Monterey County Sheriff's Department.

The Paint Busters formed a year and a half ago when Martin mobilized a weekend effort to rid the town of graffiti. She anticipated help from 50 to 60 community members, and 144 youngsters showed up to help.



**Debbie Martin**

Recently, gang members from Watsonville, Greenfield and Salinas have become Paint Busters.

"It doesn't matter where you live," Martin said.

A series of projects and activities followed, and it got to the point where Martin, the mother of children ranging in age from 10 to 2, wanted to cut back on her in-

volvement.

But the youths wouldn't let her. She was persuaded to stay with lines such as, "You're leaving us just like everybody else does."

Since the group was established, Martin has held an ongoing open house at her tidy apartment, where gang members feel free to drop in unannounced.

The community has to take the time to re-educate itself on its approach toward delinquent youths, Martin told the lunchtime gathering, as Monterey County Sheriff Norman Hicks, several judges and probation officials listened.

Respect is a key element to the relationship, Martin said.

"It's about being equal to each other," she said.

In her own life, Martin, one of 10 children of an alcoholic mother and a father who was a narcotics addict, pain and abuse were too-familiar occurrences.

She's found the only way to deal with wayward youths is to "get through them through here," her fist pounding against the chest of her persimmon-colored sweater.

"I may not have an A.A. (degree) or an M.A., but I have 12 years in gangs," she said.