

^{Gangs} Counselor speaks with voice of experience

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IT HAS BEEN 17 years since Frank Fuentes made headlines in Watsonville for assaulting a police officer with a crow bar. A lot can happen in that space of time, and for Fuentes, many things have changed. He's gone from being a well-known criminal, drunk and gang-banger to a caring and concerned counselor for teenagers who themselves are struggling with the same problems Fuentes once had.

Fuentes has been clean and sober for four years, and has been counseling local teenagers for the last two. The local gang-bangers know him as a "veterano," or an

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old timer who has been around for years.

When he was arrested in 1977, Fuentes says his life changed. He has old photos of himself that show him in his low-rider with a sawed-off shotgun, or drinking liquor with his brother and friends; in another, he displays his various knives. His body is riddled with old stab wounds from numerous fights, and his arms bear tattoos.

"In the early 1970s into the

1980s we didn't have any colors, the Watsonville area was all together. Mexicanos weren't fighting Mexicanos. La Raza wasn't fighting each other," says Fuentes, who thinks that the idea of different gangs claiming a certain color over which they fight came out of the media and movies such as "Colors," the 1988 film about Los Angeles gangs.

As a volunteer at the New School and GANAS, Fuentes comes in contact with many young people. It is easier for them to relate to him because of his experiences. Sometimes, though, even this is not enough, and Fuentes says he feels pain for all those kids he can't reach. "We leave the door open and when things get tough in

the street, they can come to us," Fuentes says.

Fuentes has seen things change in Watsonville. He left town for seven years to get his life together and to get away from the gang influence. When he returned he found that the violence had gotten worse. He has a hard time understanding today's teenagers, despite his own experiences as a young man.

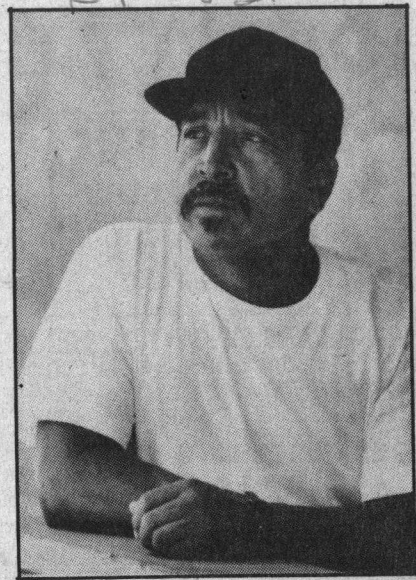
"I'm more scared of today's kids, and the violence, than I am of the veteranos," Fuentes says.

The difference is clear. Many outreach workers and locals have noticed the increased violence in the area, and in the country as a whole.

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According to Henry Robles, gang violence suppression officer for the Watsonville Police Department, the majority of the arrests for gang-related crime are of juvenile suspects. Gang-related crime statistics are not available from earlier periods. The department only started keeping track of the trend in 1992. Fuentes says that for a city the size of Watsonville, he believes the tensions are high.

"It's hard for kids to go from point A to point B without being in gang territory. They need gangs to feel safe," Fuentes says.

Another difference that Fuentes sees is the increased violence in the schools. Many educators are struggling to teach in the midst of the fear created by violence, and many children are losing out on their education because of it.

"I don't know how they make it through school," Fuentes says. "Besides having to worry about making the grades, they have to worry about getting jumped."

Additionally, newcomers to the country often get their first introduction to gang life through schools. According to Fernando Soriano, a visiting psychology professor at Stanford University, the most at-risk youth used to be second- and third-generation Latinos, because the longer they were in the country the more marginalized they would become. New immigrants, on the other hand, tended to do better because they had a greater sense of optimism for the future.

Recently, however, Soriano has seen an increase in new immigrants joining gangs because they feel threatened, even from Latino-Americans who have some ties in Mexico. Soriano attributes this animosity between second- and third-generation Latino Americans and new immigrants to a number of factors, such as language communication barriers, dif-



Kurt Ellison

Aptos High student Javier Arias, 17, holds the official GANAS program T-shirt with the logo he designed printed on the back.

ferent values that develop as one group becomes more Americanized, and a sense of fear.

"School is a prime area of contact with other populations, a place where they (new immigrants) find out how society views them," says Soriano, who suggests that because of the lack of availability of jobs, the children of new immigrants have a bleak outlook on life.

Fuentes sees the same tensions between the youth that he counsels. "Because this is a real agricultural area, a lot of the migrants from Mexico are coming with their families and kids. These kids are outcasts because they speak Spanish.

"The whole concept is wrong," he explains. "They've forgotten their ancestors and their culture. We're all the same and they're playing a dangerous game with their lives."

Despite the disappointments Fuentes often encounters with the teenagers he counsels, he is still optimistic that they can be helped.

"We still have a chance to fix these kids up."

He may be right. According to Soriano, studies show that most youth are not permanent members of gangs. The average length of membership is 1½ years. Almost all gang members are ready to leave the life if they are offered an alternative.

"It's not very hard to get kids out of gangs," Soriano says. "They're not as well-formed as the media portrays them to be, they are a very fragile formation of youth."