

Violent Northsiders had humble origin

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WATSONVILLE — Twenty years ago, five boys sat together at a kitchen table and decided to form a gang.

They called themselves the "Cinco Flats," which soon changed to "Northside," then the "Northside Locos," a name that would be shortened to the "Northsiders," an organization with more than 300 members and a dozen sub-sects.

The boys were only 14 and 15 years old at the time, and they had no idea of the sorrow, pain, and bloodshed that would follow.

"When we conceived it, we weren't consciously aware of what we were starting. It took on a life of its own," said Francisco Ramirez, 37, who was one of the original five founders along with his brother, Roberto.

"He (his brother) and I realized the madness — there's literal madness now in the gang lifestyle," Ramirez said. "We'd sit down and look back on the legacy we had

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— Francisco Ramirez,
founding gang member

left. We realized we had caused a lot of harm to people, directly or indirectly."

When the gang began they were still boys of relative innocence, compared to the men they would become.

It began at the Green Valley Apartments in Freedom, where they reveled in "mischievous pranks" — seeing how much candy and other small items they could steal from

local stores. They began selling stolen items for cash. With that money, they'd get intoxicated from sniffing paint fumes, which evolved into marijuana smoking and eventually heroin use.

Violence was also part of their lives, as they began to war with other groups of youths. Their enemies were a lot like them — second-, or third-generation Mexican-American youths.

"Because of the level of violence, we were capable of drawing a lot of individuals who wanted to be in it; they sought us out," Ramirez said, and the gang began to grow.

"Believe me there is a high — your heart starts pumping, and there's an excitement there. Most of the time you're reacting, but people who haven't been exposed to that lifestyle don't understand."

Violence beget violence and other gangs began to form in the Watsonville area, some to protect themselves from the Northsiders.

They were proud of their gang, and wore an unofficial uniform of Pendelton flannel

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shirts buttoned at the neck, pressed, baggy khaki pants and well-shined black shoes.

But, as the gangs grew, the violence increased. The killings, shootings and revenge attacks began to take a toll. Most of the original five went to prison at some point. Others, like Ramirez's brother Roberto, died from a brain tumor this year at 35.

Ramirez said his brother Roberto had left the gang life, and worked to support his family, but his past never escaped his conscience.

Ramirez also pulled out of the gang life, recently obtaining a degree from UC Santa Cruz in creative writing. He now lives in Santa Cruz with his son. Of the remaining three gang founders, two are locked up in state prison and one recently was released from prison.

"It was when the violence escalated, when they (the police) realized we existed, there was nothing they could do," Ramirez said. "I honestly believe if they had intervened from the conception of the gang, they could have pulled us out of it."