

FIGHTING GANGS: INTERVENTION

# Aztecas soccer puts gang members on same team



Gina Castaneda, a Santa Cruz County probation officer and Jefferson Award winner, coaches the Aztecas soccer team, which consists of gang-affiliated teens.

RAFAEL MORALES/CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

## PART TWO

### Program gives teens an alternative to the streets

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *The Aztecas players are not being identified because of their ages and because most are still involved in gangs.*

By JENNIFER SQUIRES  
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**WATSONVILLE** — A teenage boy walking down the street comes across a group of rival gang members. The two sides are on the verge

of clashing when one of the boys in the group tells his friends the opposing gang member is OK and should be left alone.

Many times, such an encounter would have resulted in a street fight — or worse — but this time the lone teen and the one who spoke for him were teammates. Both play on the Aztecas soccer team, a squad of teenage boys in trouble with the

law because of their gang affiliations. The team was put together and coached by county probation officer Gina Castaneda.

Many gang members, not just Aztecas players, said they might have resisted joining neighborhood gangs during adolescence had they had other activities to fill their time — namely, soccer.

SEE **SOCCER** ON A8

## SENTINEL

### SPECIAL REPORT

**DAY ONE:** Gangsters have been wreaking havoc on the county and its residents for decades.

**DAY TWO:** The attraction of gangs starts in the teen years, and so do efforts to keep youth out of them.

**DAY THREE:** Law enforcement, parents and families band together to keep violence at bay.

## 'Thug life' and peer pressure lure youth to gangs

Kids need activities, support to stay off streets

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *The Sentinel recently interviewed four young people from South County who have connections to gangs. They are not being identified because of their gang ties.*

By JENNIFER SQUIRES  
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**WATSONVILLE** — He was 9 when he started hanging around with his gang-banging older brothers and friends.

The youngest boys in the gang, and he was included, were sent on "missions" to beat up opposing gang members. If the younger boys

## MORE INSIDE

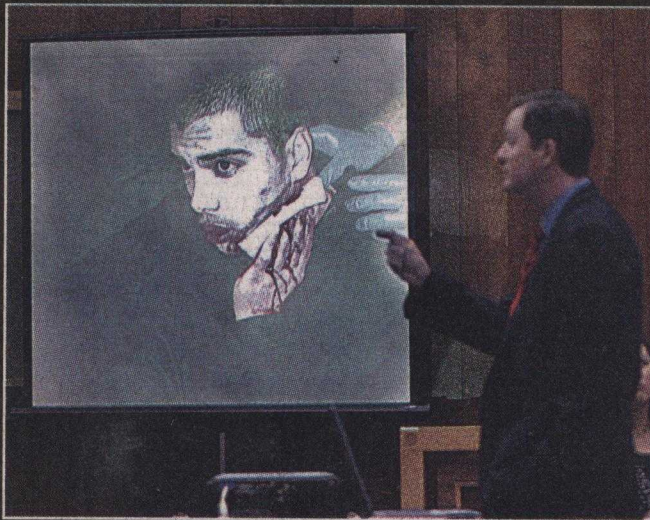
Prevention programs have a shaky future, A7

didn't listen, the older gang members would beat them.

The boy, now 17, said he always followed the orders: "I was scared."

His role in the gang escalated quickly. Even now, eight years later, it's obviously hard for him to talk about it. He has to be prodded to answer questions and his voice drops to a whisper as he describes his drug addiction and criminal

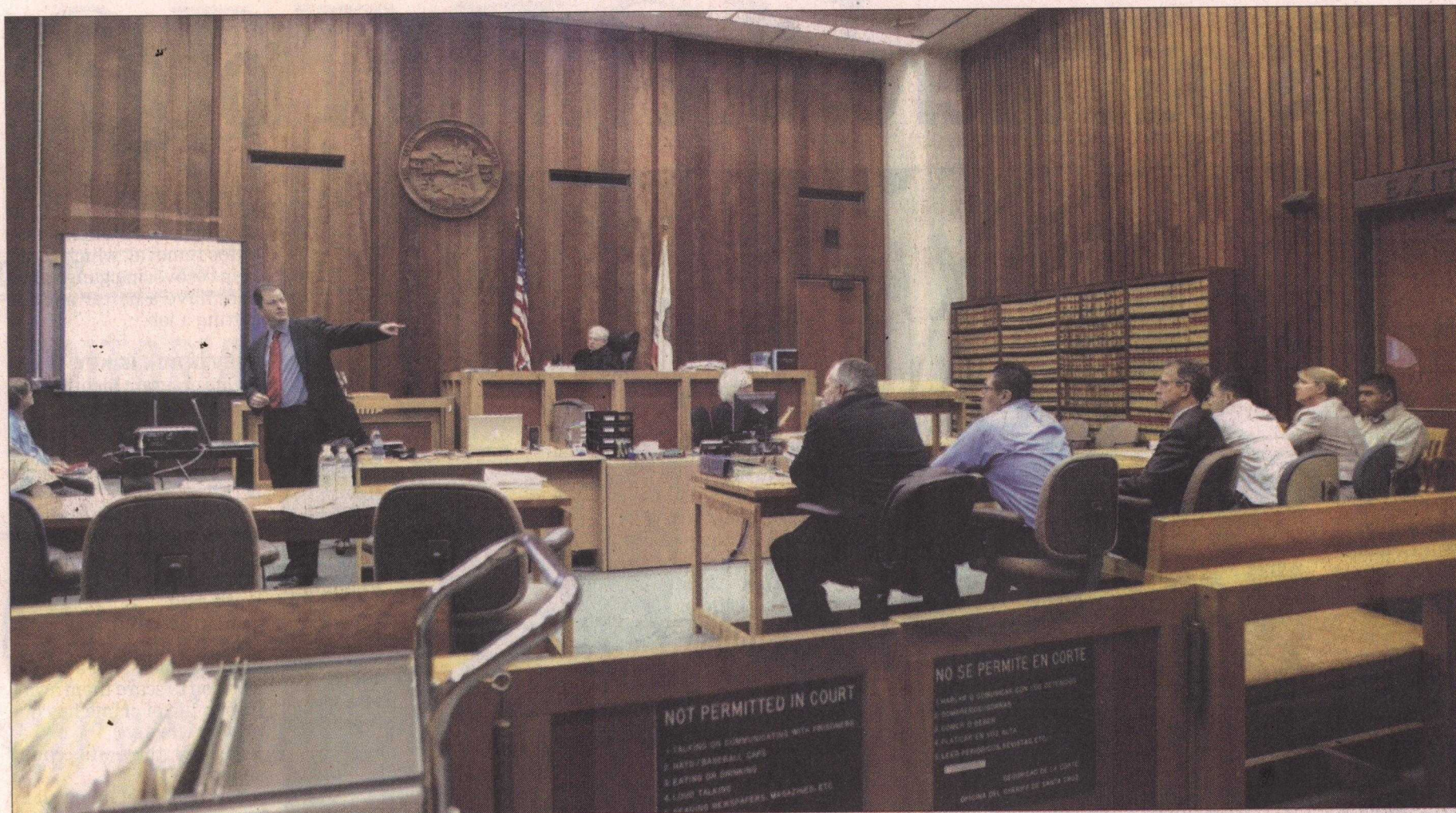
SEE **ALLURE** ON A8



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Prosecutor Charlie Baum shows a picture of gang stabbing victim to the jury in the trial of Richard Bettencourt, Juan Farias and Luis Alberto Hernandez.





DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Prosecutor Charlie Baum points out the defendants in a gang-related stabbing case to the jurors during opening statements of the trial. The defendants are Richard Bettencourt, Juan Farias and Luis Alberto Hernandez.

## ALLURE

Continued from A1

record.

When he was 11, he said, the older guys rewarded him on his missions with marijuana. By age 13, they had added cocaine and "chiva," akin to heroin. He said he sprinkled the chiva on joints and got hooked on all three drugs.

He eventually got into trouble with police for petty crimes. He dropped out of school. Opposing gang members came to his house looking for him and he ran away for a time, living on the streets with other gang members and doing drugs for about a month.

His mom worried about him, and he feared he was putting his family at risk so last winter he stopped hanging out with his gang friends, he said.

But that's been hard.

"I can't go out in public and be safe," he said.

He's still on probation, but said he's slowly beating his drug habit and hopes to go back to school. And he thinks his family is safer now.

His best advice for other teens drawn to the gang lifestyle is simple: Don't do it.

"It doesn't bring anything good," he said.

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The allure of gangs is impossible for some kids to resist.

Peer pressure, girls, a rough home life and the pervasiveness of gang culture among a vulnerable population draw many — some still in elementary school — toward gangs.

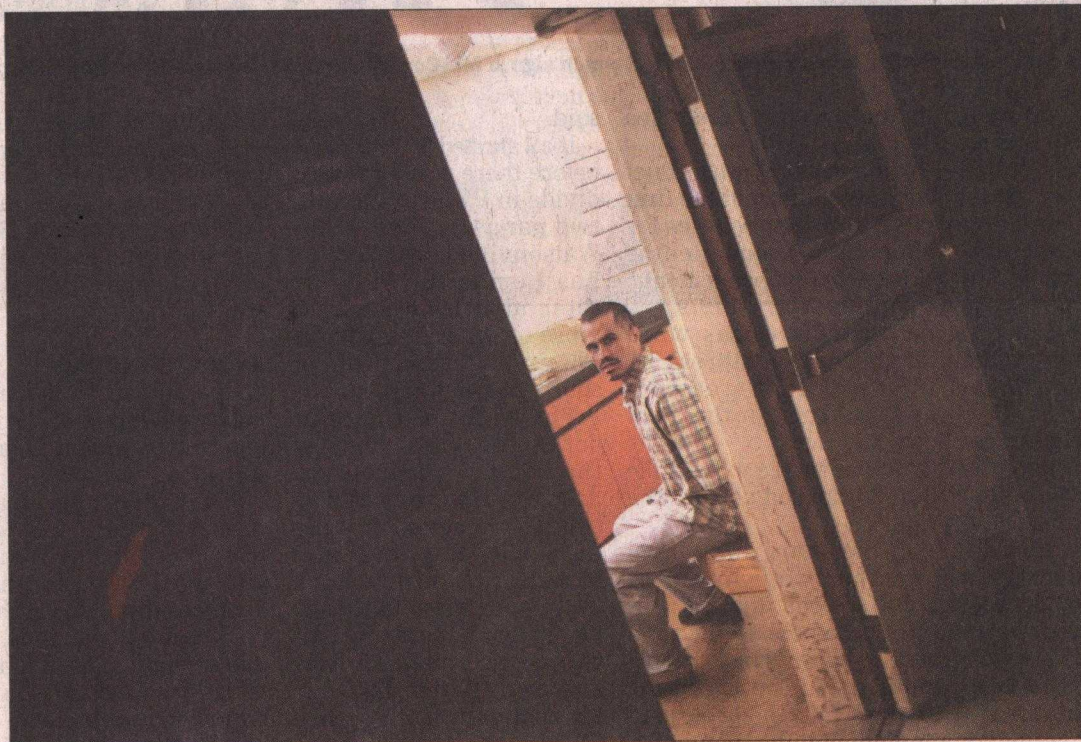
"The whole thug lifestyle is appealing because there's an impression (among) a lot of the younger guys I talk to that they can get girls if they're tough, if they're a gang member," said Watsonville Sgt. Eric Taylor, a gang investigator. "It's glorified in a way. Just like kids want to emulate athletes, some kids want to emulate gangsters."

They are teens who carry knives and give each other black-ink tattoos, like the 17-year-old stopped by Watsonville police this spring who had tattooed the name of his gang in script above his eyebrows. He also had a large chest piece, another tribute to his gang, in the works.

The teen, otherwise clean-cut, beamed as he showed off his tats. He had the same smile when he told an officer he was poised to graduate from a charter high school this spring.

Mostly, kids just want something to belong to, according to Santa Cruz officer Arnold Vasquez, also a gang investigator.

Vasquez has patrolled the Beach Flats area of Santa Cruz for years. He said he has watched kids who just a year or two earlier would ask



DAVID ROYAL/SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL

A 'southerner' sits inside the booking and detention room at the Watsonville Police Station after being brought in on a parole violation during the evening patrol in Watsonville in April. The man said that he'd just been released from prison the previous day. He admitted to being a Sureno gang member.

him to buy them ice cream turn to gangs, especially those not occupied with activities like sports or music.

"You know you're going to lose them," Vasquez said. "It's just a shame."

Those who work with young gang members — from therapists to police officers — say it's vital the kids not be written off.

"Just try to give them guidance, try to have a working relationship with them to where we can be a positive role model," Vasquez said.

But it's tough to say how often gang members do manage to get out.

Scott MacDonald, head of the county Probation Department, said many teens who get caught up in gangs hang around with a crew for a year or two, then move on to other things. He likened it to other passing interests, like a boy who plays Little League baseball, then gives it up for skateboarding.

MacDonald said he sees high member turnover, adding that those who quit were likely already on the periphery and not involved in violence. "The notion that the gangs are going to bring any kid in and any kid could become violent because of the gang exposure is not what I really see."

Vasquez sees it differently: "Once you're in a gang, you're in and you're in for life."

He called it "blood in, blood out."

■ ■ ■

Kids join gangs for a variety of reasons, but home life — either a lack of supervision or family problems — seems to be a big factor.

One 17-year-old from Watsonville said he started hanging out with his gang friends to escape problems at home. He felt safer on the streets, he said.

"You get more respect," he said. "You feel more love. They're there for you."

As he talks, the teen pauses frequently, seemingly worried he will give up too much information. Within a gang, snitching is unacceptable.

The teen won't talk about the crimes he's committed for the gang. Sometimes he and his fellow gang-bangers drink beers together or get into fights with rivals, he said, but he added that he doesn't really worry about getting hurt or into trouble.

He's still in school, though he's been arrested and spent time in Juvenile Hall.

He said he encourages his younger siblings to go to school and steer clear of gangs; however, he said he has no desire to leave the gang and thinks he would be killed if he did.

"I just want to stay in it," he said.

He said his parents have asked him to quit.

Santa Cruz police Lt. R. ...  
Santa Cruz.

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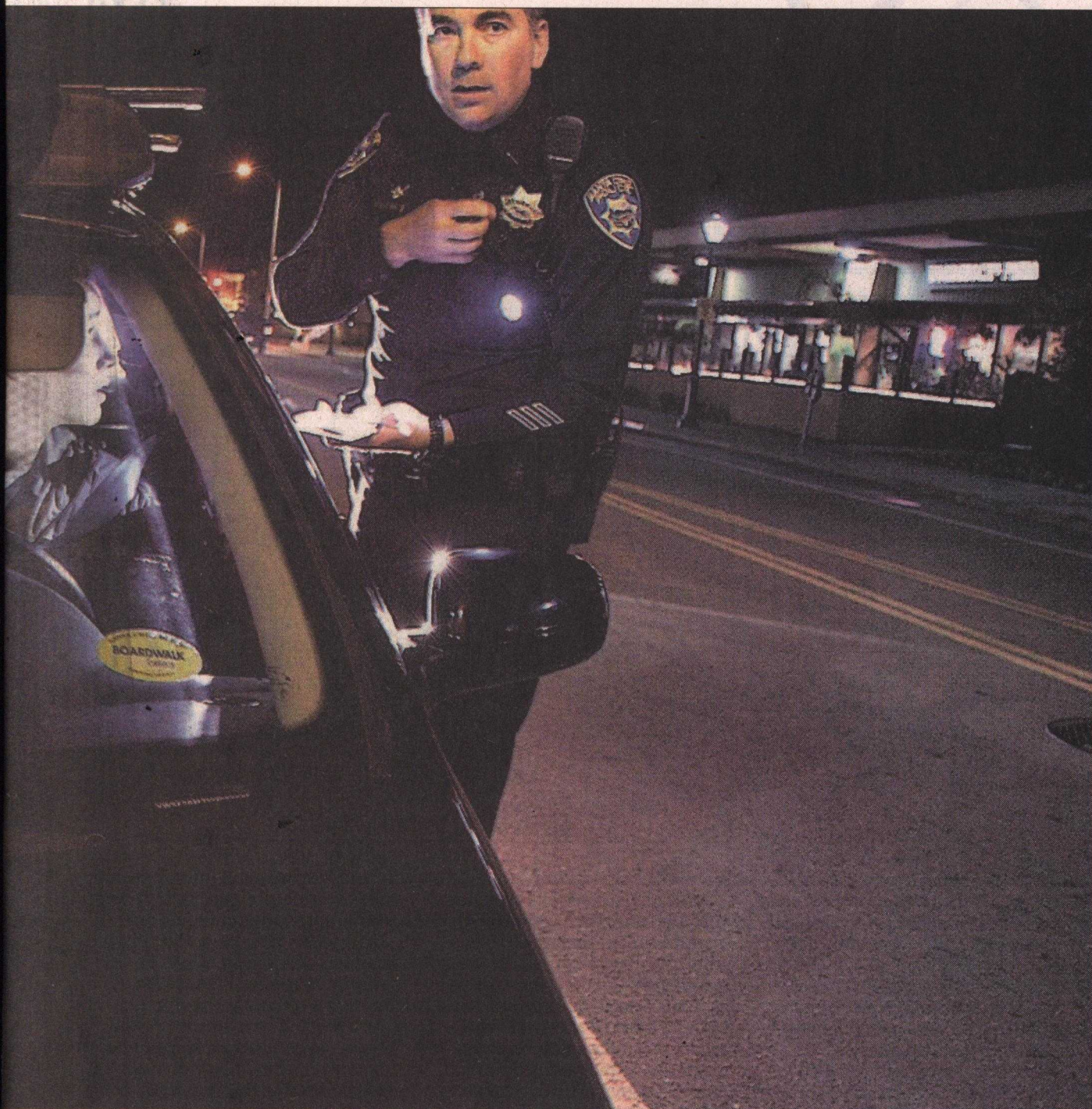
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A female gang mem



A Santa Cruz police cruiser flashing and sirens blaring.





JEREMIAH RIDGEWAY/SENTINEL

Officer Martinez stops a suspicious car on Front Street on a Friday night. Police say rival gangs sometimes clash after a night out in downtown

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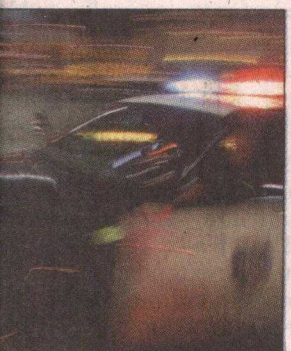
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JEREMIAH RIDGEWAY/SENTINEL  
er races to a call with lights

lent gang activity, though, is rare, and there  
are few female gang members in the county.  
Vasquez, the Santa Cruz police officer, esti-  
mated about 5 percent of local gang members  
are girls.

One Watsonville girl, a 17-year-old high  
school student, said she doesn't belong to a gang  
because she doesn't want to get beaten up. She  
said the female gangsters in her area grew up  
and are no longer active members.

But the girl has male friends who are in  
gangs.

"I think they like it," she said. "You can just  
tell they like it."

■■■

One 22-year-old Watsonville gang member  
speaks frankly about his gang activity, pleased  
to explain why he joined and why he's now try-  
ing to leave the crew. He said he hopes his open-  
ness will resonate with youth on the verge of  
trouble and turn them away from gangs.

He was 14 when he hooked up with the Sure-  
nos in his neighborhood, he said. Older rela-  
tives were already in the gang, which made it  
easy for him to join.

"That made me want to be like them," he said.  
"We would hang out, sell drugs (and) we would  
drink in the corner."

An older, higher-ranking gang member gave  
the boys heroin to sell, but they got hooked on  
the drug, too. That was OK, he said, so long as  
the gang got its cut of the revenue.

Armed with knives, the younger gang mem-  
bers cruised around Watsonville or the Board-  
walk in Santa Cruz looking for rivals to beat up.  
That showed they were "down for the neighbor-  
hood," he said.

"Pretty much anybody that was wearing  
red, we would hit them up, like asking them  
where they were from," he said. "At that time  
it made us look good, look tough. ... At that time  
I thought it was pretty cool."

He was beaten up a few times, but consid-  
ers himself lucky because he wasn't shot at or  
stabbed. Some of his friends were hurt. A few  
died.

"At that time I wanted to fight for them and  
still try to make our gang stronger," he said.

He said his mother and father knew he was  
getting into trouble and tried to intervene, but  
they were gone at work and couldn't control  
what he did.

"They would punish me but it didn't really  
work," he said.

The fighting and drug dealing landed him in  
Juvenile Hall, then County Jail after he turned  
18. But being incarcerated wasn't so bad, he  
said, because all of his friends were there. He  
said he thought jail was cool.

All of that changed when he and his girlfriend  
had their first child three years ago. He stopped  
hanging out with his gang friends and tried to  
go straight, which was easier said than done.  
He is still considered a gang member by law  
enforcement, he said, and rival gang members  
hit him up because of the way he looks and  
dresses. For the most part, his old gang leaves  
him be.

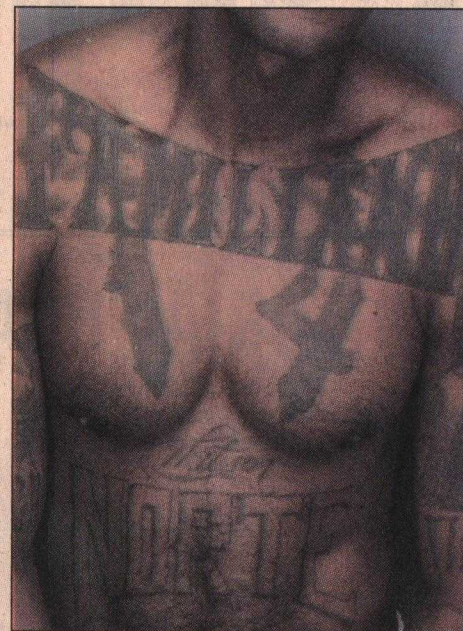
"I manage to stay away from them," he said.  
"They're not upset. They see that I have kids,  
I have my family so they really don't bother  
me."

Slowly, his life is moving forward. He fin-  
ished high school, but his gang tattoos and  
criminal record make it difficult to get a job  
to support his girlfriend and two kids, he said.  
A year ago, he temporarily lost custody of one  
of his children because he was still using her-  
oin.

Looking back on it, he said he might have  
stayed off the streets entirely had he had  
something going on at school, like sports. He  
said his younger brother started "banging"  
recently, and that while he has tried to pull  
him out of the lifestyle, his brother won't lis-  
ten.

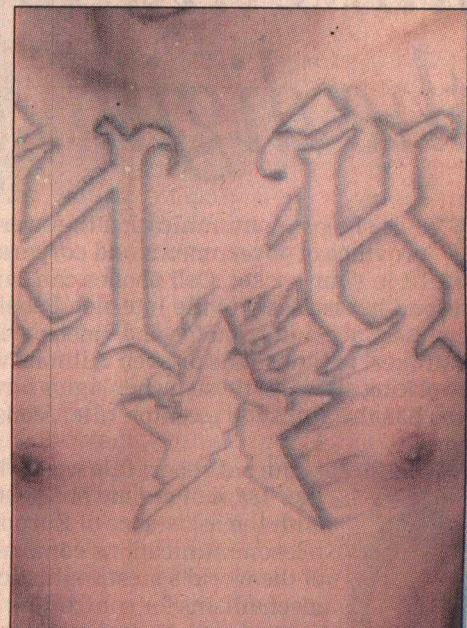
"I was telling him if you keep on going the  
same road it's not going to get you nowhere,"  
he said. "I was telling him just to be careful  
because once you're in it, it's hard to get out.  
... It's not going to lead to no good and just lead  
your family to misery."

## GANG TATTOOS



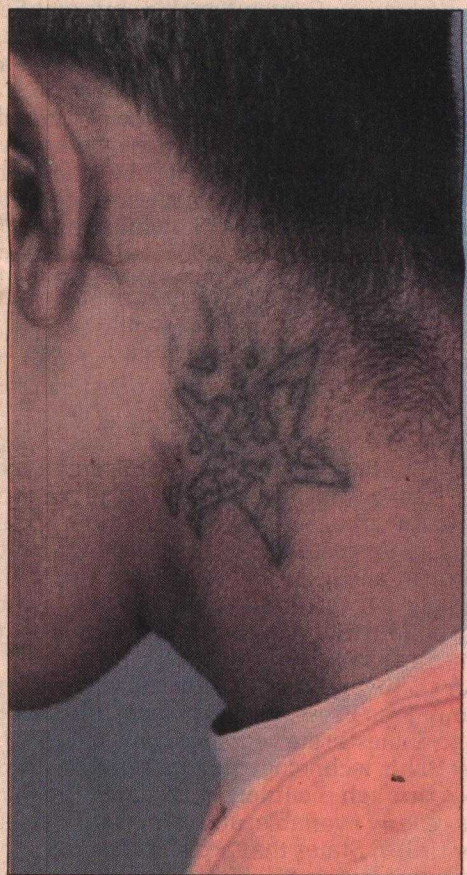
CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

The root of Norteno gangs is 'Nuestra Fam-  
ilia,' a Mexican prison gang that started in the  
1960s. Now the gang has hundreds of sub-  
sets, including a half-dozen in Watsonville and  
two in Santa Cruz.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

'NK' is a southerner tattoo that stands for  
'Norteno Killer.' The letters are backward so  
the gang member can read them when he  
looks in the mirror. The broken, falling star  
also represents the demise of northerners.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

The star is a symbol for the northern gang,  
but a broken, falling star like the one shown  
here is a Sureno marking that means 'Norte-  
nos falling.'

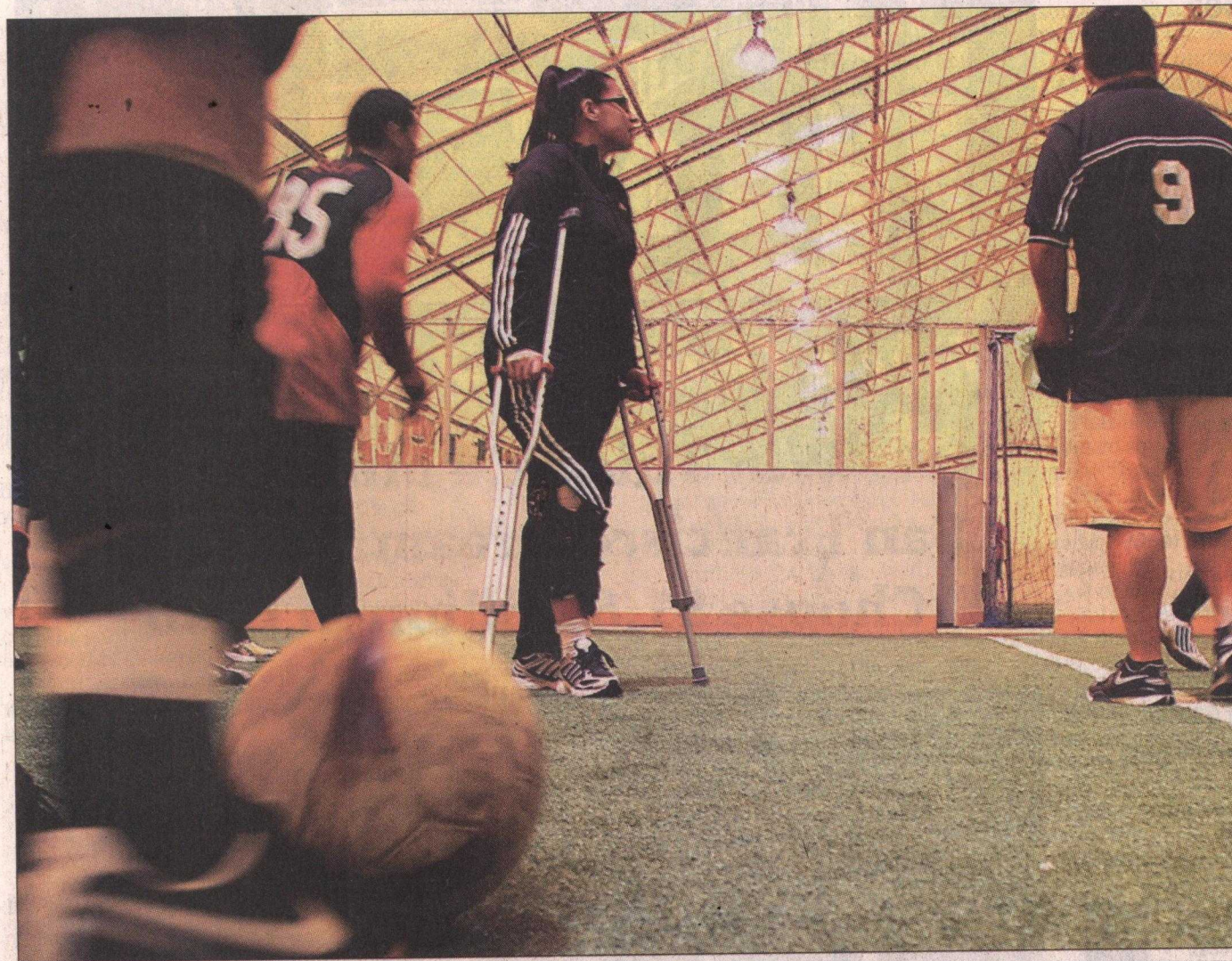


Santa Cruz for years. He said he has watched kids who just a year or two earlier would ask

Vasquez sees it differently: "Once you're in a gang, you're in and you're in for life."

I just want to stay in it," he said. He said his parents have asked him to quit.

A sound and police flashing and sirens blarin



JEREMIAH RIDGEWAY/SENTINEL

County probation officer Gina Castaneda, center, coaches the Aztecas soccer team, a squad of gang-affiliated teens, during a game at Soccer Central in Watsonville.

## SOCCER

Continued from A1

Castaneda, 34, suspected this was true. Often, when she was dealing with youth offenders at Juvenile Hall in Felton, she would ask the boys if they played soccer. Many said yes, but most were not on a team. She connected some with local soccer programs, but thought it would be more beneficial for the troubled boys to play together.

So last April, Castaneda, a former Aptos High soccer star, took up a collection among her co-workers at the county Probation Department and used the cash to register a group of boys to play in the Watsonville indoor men's soccer league. All of the players — nine right now, ages 15-19 — are current or former gang members.

"Some are teetering. They want to get out (of their gangs)," Castaneda said. "It's huge that these kids even walk in the door."

Before the team ever donned uniforms, which at first were just black T-shirts, Castaneda made boys sit down together and agree to keep their gang rivalries off the field. The boys shook hands.

"The first couple of games we didn't know what would happen," Castaneda said. "Two of the boys who played together had actually fought on the streets."

But the allegiance among the Aztecas has proven valuable. Castaneda, who told the story about the

potential confrontation, refused because the rival members, said they couldn't quantify what problem may have been negated by growing respect for one another. Players said they had their communication and teachers. They had self-esteem and confidence, but not a drug habit.

A 17-year-old boy on the team said that being involved with the team, though they are rivals on the soccer field, makes him more tolerant at school and on the street.

"The boys have come a long way," Castaneda said. "They have a lot of gang issues, but they're not having."

The Aztecas also have won games on the field. The team won the playoffs four times and took second place in the spring. Though they play against adult men.

On the field, the boys have three adult players, including Castaneda's husband, who "cheered," according to the coaches from behind the goal that rims the field, yells in English and Spanish, and runs a steady rotation from the sideline to the field.

On a Monday evening, the Aztecas recovered from a deficit to outscore the 5-0. One boy, a slender first-time player that night, asked for an eas



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went down hard in his first few min-  
utes of play, then came back to score  
two goals in a matter of seconds.

Before and after the games, the  
boys — wearing matching black  
and two-tone green soccer jerseys —  
shake hands with each other, their  
coaches and the parents who come  
to support them.

The team has not been without its  
problems, however.

Funding is a constant struggle.  
Most come from poor families that  
cannot afford the league registration  
fees, which runs \$600 for an eight-  
week season, or equipment, like soc-  
cer shoes.

Team practices are also rare. Rent-  
ing time on the small field at the are-  
na costs \$70 an hour, but it's risky  
for the boys to play together in a  
neighborhood park. They could be  
targeted by rival gangs or even their  
own gangs, punishment for hanging  
out with the enemy.

One player stopped coming to  
games and Castaneda feared he had  
fallen back in with his gang, so she  
visited him at home. Another has a  
case pending in Monterey County  
courts. She said the team helps her  
keep track of these boys, who have  
problems but aren't on her Probation  
Department case load.

Boys on the team said they joined  
because they like to play soccer.  
They also admit that being a part of  
Aztecas helps keep them out of trou-  
ble because Castaneda and the other  
adults involved check up on them.

"Everybody thinks it's just soccer.  
It's not just soccer," Castaneda said.



An Azteca player, left, battles an opponent during a game at Soccer Central in Watsonville.

JEREMIAH RIDGEWAY/SENTINEL