

Finding a way out

**GANG
LIFE**
KIDS ARE
DYING

10-6-94

Ganggo Communities look for ways to turn the tide

By **MARIANNE BIASOTTI**
Sentinel staff writer

Luis Medina has created an unlikely basketball team at Watsonville Community Center made up of some 25 boys and men.

It didn't matter that most had never played on a team before, and that there still isn't money for uniforms. There isn't time to wait for funds promised for midnight basketball leagues in President Clinton's recently approved crime bill.

What is important is that players affiliated with the city's Sureno gang have begun to play ball with Norteno gang members, as well as youths with no gang ties.

Eventually, Medina, a Watsonville recreation coordinator through the BASTA program, is shooting for a "World Champion Tournament," where the team must cross rival turf to play against other teams.

"Eventually, we'll be able to tear down the walls of territories and boundaries that exist between gangs, but don't exist between other people," said Medina. "It's not going to be a love fest — none of these things have happened overnight. It takes a lot of time and energy."

Along with a football league organized by Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance, it is one of the few organized programs available to those over 18, even though many gang members are in their early 20s.

"There's a big gap because those are the kids who can't go to the high school, and who can't get a lot of help anymore. But we have to deal with them. If not, it'll get worse," Medina said.

Nane Alejandre of the Santa Cruz-based Barrios Unidos has been working with local gangs since the late 1970s, and is well aware of the gradual, often frustrating pace of progress.

"I always tell young organizers this is a long-distance run. Most come in wanting to do a 60-yard

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Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

Luis Alejo, in beret at right, helped organize a march against violence through Watsonville.

Father, son work toward peace, unity in 'la raza'

By **MARIANNE BIASOTTI**
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — Twenty-year-old Luis Alejo often was mistaken for a Boy Scout as he walked door to door, trying to recruit kids from his city's poorest neighborhoods to wash cars, paint graffiti or volunteer at local events.

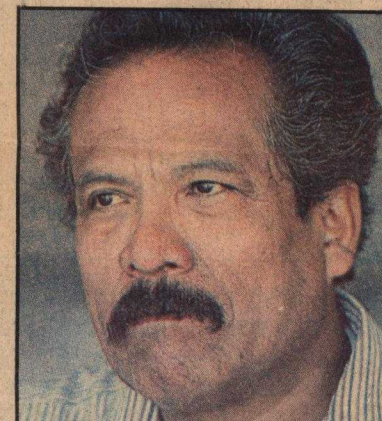
Dressed in a neatly pressed khaki uniform, Alejo and about 20 others targeted streets where gang members are the most constant role models for the children who live there.

Alejo offered a different role model as he and other Latino youths resurrected the Brown Berets, a disbanded 1960s organization that fought for Chicano rights and political representation.

Meanwhile, in an old garage at the County Jail's rehabilitation center outside the city, his 54-year-old father, switching between Spanish and English, led a group of 30 inmates in a series of discussions on gangs. The men listened carefully to Tom Alejo, since all either have been gang members or are "red or blue sympathizers," Alejo explained.

He told his captive audience how two of his sons were in gangs, and that it's a miracle the oldest didn't die from a head wound he received in a fight.

He then told them about Luis, his second-oldest child, who three years after leaving the gang was the principal organizer of Watsonville's first Peace and



Tom Alejo

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Turning the tide

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dash. This work eats you up, it takes a lot from you. You have to be prepared," Alejandrez said.

Organized efforts to slow the growth of youth gangs in the county through prevention and intervention efforts came after the increase in violence became impossible to ignore, say gang prevention workers.

"We were trying to get people to realize that this was going to grow, but they didn't listen," said Alejandrez. "Santa Cruz was a tourist town, and they thought it wasn't going to happen. ... All of these cities had been in denial."

For some county residents, the awakening came seven months ago, when a 9-year-old Pajaro girl walking home from a nearby bakery was killed by a gunshot to the head. Her 16-year-old brother ran for cover inside the bakery, where he was gunned down.

But others, like Freedom resident Herbert Schwartz, say youth violence doesn't affect their neighborhood and is not their problem.

Schwartz opposes an effort by his neighbors to be annexed into Watsonville because he doesn't want to be associated with the city, and prefers an address in unincorporated Freedom.

"I have nothing against Watsonville except for the crimes and the gangs, and we don't need that," Schwartz said.

But Debra Moonan Churchill, supervisor of Watsonville's parks and recreation programs, said that kind of attitude must change.

"We're just starting to understand it's not 'them,' it's 'us.' It affects all of us, and it's time we all get off our butts and get involved," said Moonan Churchill.

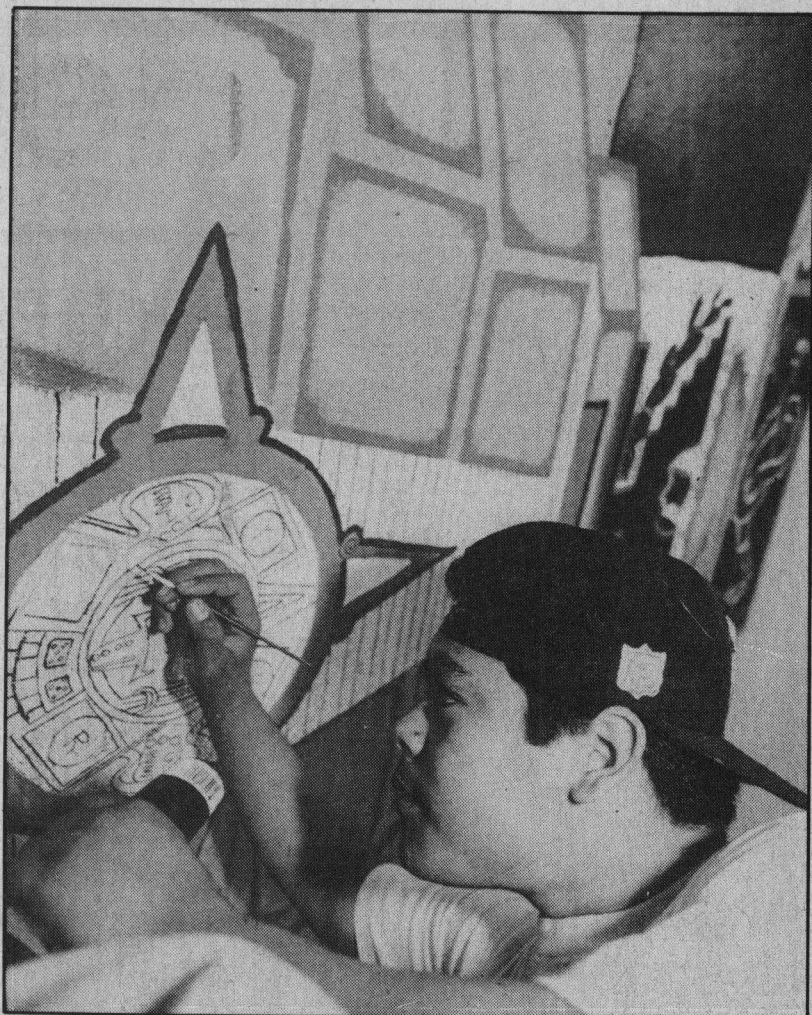
On campus

While gangs were not a subject openly talked about on school campuses, educators are joining law enforcement officials in efforts to protect their campuses from increased violence.

For the first time this year, two full-time police officers are assigned to beats at Watsonville and Santa Cruz high schools, where gang rivalries have increased the number of students expelled for fights and weapons possession.

The so-called school resource officers are paid for jointly by those two cities and their respective school districts. Watsonville High School's officer was additionally funded by a federal grant aimed at placing 100,000 officers in the streets nationwide.

"We're not sending the officer up there with a baton to kick ass," said Officer Tom Bailey. "Instead of responding to a fight that just occurred, he'll be up there talking to students at lunch, after school, on breaks, in classes and at foot-



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Artist paints mural at Watsonville's Youth Services program, in project that paid at-risk youths for their work.

ball games."

Said Santa Cruz High School Principal George Perez: "Most of our problems are walk-on problems. Kids who are 19-21 who used to hang around here don't hang around here anymore."

Schools also are mandating strict dress codes meant to eliminate caps, T-shirts and jackets that sport the colors red or blue, the numbers 13 or 14 and gang monikers that educators say promote gang allegiance, encourage violence and disrupt the learning environment on campus.

New School, second chance

Realizing that many juvenile gang members don't even attend school, the Pajaro Valley school district was the first in the county to create an educational program aimed at luring drop-outs back into the classroom.

"New School" gives some 30 students, most of whom have gang affiliations, the chance to catch up on missed school credits with one-on-one help from teachers. They also receive personal and family counseling, and are required to do volunteer work or if they're lucky enough, get a paid job through the county Job Training Placement Program.

Last June, New School students thanked Pajaro Valley school trustees for agreeing to fund the innovative program. Most told how unconventional learning methods,

like setting classroom rules themselves and holding peers accountable to those rules made them care about themselves, their education and each other.

Students' stories illustrated how the district's investment paid off.

After completing their first three and half months last June, two students earned enough credits to get their high school diplomas, two others did well enough to return to mainstream high schools, and two entered a program at Radcliff Adult School. Another 17 are continuing the program this year.

"It turned my life around," said Nui Anaya, a former gang member who spoke about the "family" environment he found at the school. "Without them, I don't think I'd be alive. ... Before, we would have killed each other in the streets. Now, we defend each other." Anaya is attending Cabrillo College and wants to return to the program as a counselor.

But not all were as successful. Of the remaining 12 students, five were sent to drug treatment programs, and five were kicked out or dropped out. Two others left the

program because a new classmate was a rival gang member. One subsequently was arrested, locked up, placed in a group home and is trying to earn her way back.

"I realized my home girls weren't my family. ... You're my real family," the girl told program leaders during a tearful interview, according to New School teacher Don Eggleston.

"The thing for most kids is, what do you do when you get out of gangs?" said Eggleston. "There need to be more options, like New School. Once you've made that decision to stop doing the bad things, what are the good things you can do?"

Some 30 kids are on the school's waiting list, out of an estimated 200 juveniles in the Pajaro Valley school district who are in the streets instead of at school.

A handful of New School students were transferred to Youth Services in Watsonville, which offers a drug treatment program and high-school level classes in its office to complement its extensive counseling program. A similar program will begin in its Santa Cruz branch. Youths attend classes four hours a day and afterward participate in group sessions and one-on-one counseling.

Recreation Programs

For most kids who make the streets their playground or hang-out, after-school and summer recreation, arts and sports programs are often out of reach because they can't pay for them or their parents aren't around and they don't have transportation. Across the river in neighboring Pajaro, there isn't a single park for its young residents other than a tot lot.

Santa Cruz also is using recreation as a prime crime-fighting tool.

"We're finding out that kids are having more and more time on their hands ... and that if we don't spend money on recreational programs, we'll have to spend it on law enforcement," said Dannettee Shoemaker, Santa Cruz's recreation superintendent.

That's why Santa Cruz is spending an additional \$15,000 this year on beefing up youth recreation and job programs. In its 'Swim-Gym' program, an estimated 700 students used school pools and gymnasiums for recreation, to watch movies and listen to local high school bands. Gymnasiums were opened to youths at Harbor and San Lorenzo Valley high schools, the gym and weight room at Santa Cruz High and the gym and pool at Soquel High.

In the Pajaro Valley, gymnasiums are now open at night to host a couple of hundred basketball players. At the Pajaro Middle

School gym, high school students participating in a new evening basketball league, while at the Watsonville YMCA, a Friday Night Hoops Program is open to seventh through ninth graders. There are no such programs for girls, though a future league is in the works, said program director Laura Burke.

Watsonville's \$1.7 million youth center, replacing the one demolished after the 1989 earthquake, began serving some 200 youths daily ages 6-17 when it opened last weekend in the city's downtown.

But turf lines drawn by Watsonville gangs mean the facility may not be used by kids who view downtown as enemy territory. Recognizing that, the city's recreation department started an after-school program in Ramsey Park in September to include outdoor and indoor activities aimed at kids in the city's northwest end.

"For some of them, (their street) is their little world, so we got to expose them to other activities and other lifestyles," said Medina. "If you don't get the opportunity to see that, you don't know it's possible."

Jobs

This summer, some 600 kids countywide participated in the federally funded Hire Youth Program, aimed at providing minimum wage jobs to low-income kids. During the year the numbers drop to 200, a decline mostly due to the lack of jobs offered by local businesses.

"People are always saying, 'Do something about poverty.' One thing that can affect that is employing youth," said Gail Groves, with the county's Human Resources Agency.

The county jobs program, called Careerworks, pays minimum wage to youths throughout the county.

Behind Watsonville's Goodwill Store, kids learned to repair bikes; at Youth Services, students designed and painted an indoor mural and produced a gang prevention video. Unfortunately, said bike shop teacher Marc Lucadano, the jobs only last during the summer.

"It's sad they have all this money to build a new wing in Juvenile Hall, but don't have money for a program like this that could keep them out," Lucadano said.

In Santa Cruz, 32 Santa Cruz High students cleared county trails, worked at the Beach Flats Kids Club and Garden, painted fences on the wharf, planted native vegetation at Lighthouse Field and produced a play through the Summer Training Education Partnership. The program also included seminars on conflict resolution, leadership and how to apply for jobs, which are worth 10 high school credits.

GANG LIFE

KIDS ARE DYING

'Eventually, we'll be able to tear down the walls of territories and boundaries that exist between gangs, but don't exist between other people.'

— Luis Medina,
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'I always tell young organizers this is a long-distance run. Most come in wanting to do a 60-yard dash.'

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'Before, we would have killed each other in the streets. Now, we defend each other.'

— Nui Anaya, a former
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How you can help

Here's where to get help, or programs you can help with time or money:

Recreation:

- Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation Department: call Dannette Shoemaker at 429-3663.
- Beach Flats Community Center, Santa Cruz: 429-3188.
- Watsonville Parks and Recreation Department: sports, recreation and field trips. Call Luis Medina at 728-6169.

• Watsonville Gene Hoularis and Waldo Rodriguez Youth Center: 728-6081.

• St. Francis Penny Club Youth Center, Watsonville: call Rev. Richard Voigt at 763-4484.

• Watsonville Family YMCA: sponsors various recreation programs, including the Friday Night Hoops and Together in Pajaro basketball leagues. Call Jesus Soto at 728-9622.

• Milagros, Watsonville: a program that offers camping and other trips to disadvantaged youth. Call Mike Chavez at 722-5914.

• Watsonville Browns football league: call Alan Sowell with Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance at 728-6445.

• Genesis: a dance and music program for disadvantaged youth from elementary to high school. Call Luis Medina at 728-6169.

• Pros for Youth: Former and present National Football League players soon plan to meet weekly with local youths associated with gangs. Call Phil Lawrence with the Salvation Army at 761-4310.

Counseling:

• Barrios Unidos, Santa Cruz: gang prevention and intervention counseling and programs. Call Nane Alejandrez at 457-8208.

• Youth Services, Santa Cruz and Watsonville: gang intervention and substance abuse counseling for youths and their families. Call Dave Covos at 425-0771 or Lucia Vindiola-Nacua at 728-2226.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Victims were remembered at Watsonville anti-gang rally last summer sponsored by Brown Berets.

• Fenix Services, Watsonville: gang intervention and substance abuse counseling for youths and adults. Call Ramon Cervantes, director, at 722-4211.

• ALTO Counseling Center, Watsonville: substance abuse counseling and parent support groups. Call Patty Arana at 728-2233.

• GANAS (Gang Alternatives North and South), Watsonville: support groups meetings Wednesday nights for youths involved with gangs. Call Belinda Pena at 728-6445.

• Si Se Puede, Watsonville: a men's residential program for substance abusers. Call Juan Perez at 761-5422.

Education

• DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education): officers lead school presentations that include lessons on gang prevention and violence. Call Hank Snow at the Watsonville Police Department: 728-6136; Joe Flores at the county Sheriff's Office: 454-2474; John Weiss at the Scotts Valley Police Department: 438-2328; and Herb Ross at the Capitola Police Department: 475-4242.

• New School, Watsonville: a program for high school dropouts that gives one-on-one support to gang-related youths. Call Linda Perez at Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance at 728-6445.

• The Cesar Chavez School of Social Change, Santa Cruz: provides education, leadership training, dance, art and job training for youths. Opens under one roof by the end of the year. Call Nane Alejandrez of Barrios Unidos at 457-8208.

• Youth Services, Watsonville: Escuela Quetzal, a school that complements gang and substance abuse counseling program. Call 728-2226.

• Fenix Services gang prevention counselor for Watsonville schools: Mike Chavez at 722-4211.

• Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance gang prevention counselor for Pajaro Valley schools: Belinda Pena at 728-6445.

Youth Groups:

• Brown Berets, Watsonville chapter: a Chicano organization that promotes non-violence, education, cultural and political awareness and leadership training. Call Felipe Hernandez at 761-9824.

• Boy Scouts of America: (800) 442-7945.

• Girl Scouts of America: (800) 624-4757.

• Check with churches and other places of worship in your area.

Jobs Programs:

• Hire Youth: call Bridget Kuhn with the county Job Training Partnership Act at 454-4080.

Compiled by Marianne Biasotti

Coordination helps effort to track, work with gangs

By MARIANNE BIASOTTI

Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — Even before this year's tide of gang-dominated violence caused local communities to demand an end to it, Watsonville had begun a \$1.2 million counter-attack called BASTA, hailed as the most effective anti-gang effort in the county.

Last spring, the county Criminal Justice Council honored BASTA as "the outstanding program" in Santa Cruz County, an award given every two years. A Spanish acronym for 'Enough,' BASTA, or Broad-Based Apprehension, Suppression, Treatment and Alternatives, is a model being embraced by agencies throughout Santa Cruz County two years after its inception.

Rather than creating a new level of bureaucracy, BASTA was developed to strengthen efforts of Watsonville agencies already working to rehabilitate young offenders and to prevent gang involvement.

"These are complex problems that have many dimensions, and any program trying to address just one of them is doomed to fail," said Bud Frank, former executive director of the county Criminal Justice Council.

Watsonville was one of a dozen cities in the state that were among the first to receive such a grant from the state Office of Criminal Justice Planning.

"When we started talking about how the (justice) system was working or what was not working, we found that the right hand didn't know what the left was doing. Now, each can contribute their piece of the pie to target the kid in question," said Michael Kerrington, spokesman for the state Office of Criminal Justice Planning.

Among BASTA's chief accomplishments since it began in 1992 was helping the District Attorney's Office ask for and receive stiffer punishments for gang members by filing gang enhancement charges, which carry additional 1-to-3 year prison sentences.

Though the charge has been on

'We know members and associates, current rivalries, why a member would attack another member.'

— Henry Robles, BASTA investigator

the books since 1987, there were only two attempts by the county to prosecute gang members under this statute before 1992, and both failed, said BASTA-funded prosecutor Patty Bazar.

With coordinated efforts between BASTA's probation and police officer, the District Attorney's Office has filed 16 cases with a gang enhancement charge in the past two years — 11 in 1993 and five through June of this year. Of the four cases that went to trial, three were successful, Bazar said.

The gang enhancement charge also means that a drive-by shooting suspect found guilty must remain locked up 15 years before he can be considered for parole.

"We've done backgrounds on these guys and we know members and associates, current rivalries, why a member would attack another member. With that information, we're able to testify," said Henry Robles, BASTA's gang investigator for the Watsonville Police Department. "If this is handled by an agency that's not aware of what's happening, the gang enhancement charge would never be filed."

Despite the Pajaro Valley's four homicides this year, the number of gang-related assaults has dropped since BASTA was introduced.

In 1993, the first year gang crime statistics were compiled by BASTA, there were 30 assaults through July. This year, assaults totaled

one-third that amount, or nine in the same time period, according to figures compiled by BASTA crime analyst Linda Peters.

While the Sentinel has found that data tracking gang-related crime is unavailable or sporadic at best within other county law enforcement agencies, BASTA's full-time crime analyst allows the Watsonville Police Department to track gang-related crimes.

Complementing the law enforcement aspect is BASTA's preventive and rehabilitation efforts, led by gang prevention counselors at Fenix Services and Youth Services.

Not only do counselors offer support to youths, but they help the BASTA probation officer keep track of whether juveniles are attending counseling sessions, going to school or working to comply with the terms of their release.

Through the Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance Program, BASTA also offers in-class and after-school sessions on decision making and gang prevention, as well as classes for teachers and parents. PVPSA's program GANAS — Gang Alternatives North and South — was created through BASTA to bring together some 40 rival gang members and other youths weekly who learn positive ways to resolve conflicts.

"A lot of it was getting to the schools, to the population itself to say we do have a problem, to educate the public to understand what a gang is," said juvenile officer Tom Bailey of the Santa Cruz Police Department. "That's where BASTA is and what we (in Santa Cruz) are trying to do."

Today, Santa Cruz is where Watsonville was about three years ago, Bailey said, and is patterning its Gang Intervention Team after the BASTA model, but without the grant money. Santa Cruz plans to apply for a similar grant in the future, he said. Likewise, the BASTA team is also helping set up a countywide gang suppression unit.

"We've had this problem for a while, and now it has started getting out of control, so we're asking 'What can we do?'" said Bailey.

Parents battle denial

Hope found in families

By MARIANNE BIASOTTI
Sentinel staff writer

FREEDOM — The three mothers who lost their children this year in gang-related crimes emphatically deny their sons were involved in gangs.

Law enforcement officials say otherwise.

The three mothers are not alone. It is typical for parents to deny their child's gang involvement, which compounds the problem, say counselors and law enforcement officials.

But some parents are defying the norm. For the past year they've called themselves *Esperanza Para Las Familias*, or Hope For Families. The group of some 20 parents meets weekly at Freedom Elementary School to prevent violence, provide a support group and include families of rival gang members into their program.

"We don't pay attention until it's happening to us," said Isabel, an *Esperanza* member.

But even then, say law enforcement officials, parent denial is rampant.

"We'll search a (shooting suspect's) room and find every inch covered with gang graffiti — signs, tags and gang rosters," said Patricia Bazar, assistant district attorney assigned to gang cases in South County.

"Parents will look us in the eye and say, 'My son is not involved in gangs.' I tell them, 'Well the number 13 isn't on the toe of his shoe to remind him of his shoe size.'"

In one case, Bazar said, the family of a Poorsider testified in court that he was not a gang member: "I had 78 photos taken from his room of gang members posing, flashing gang signs, wearing colors in very formalized postures," she said.

The saddest part, she added, was that several photos showed a group of young children and grown men in gang garb and flashing gang signs: "When I asked her if she knew who the people in the picture were, she said, 'That's my family.'"

Counselor Glen Smith of Youth Services in Watsonville said in many cases of youths who run astray, parents need counseling as much as their kids: "The kids who do the best in our program are the ones where parents come down and participate."

Unfortunately, many parents don't cooperate, even if family counseling is ordered by the court. Watsonville juvenile probation officer Jack Borges said he's lucky if a



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Esperanza Para Las Familia has united to counteract gangs at the Green Valley apartments in Freedom.

handful of parents of the 30 juveniles under his supervision participate in counseling programs.

"You'll find a lot of parents who don't want to get involved," said Borges. "And if parents aren't going to counseling, what are you going to do, pull them in?"

While it's too late for some *Esperanza* parents to prevent their children from joining the neighborhood gang or avoid jail, they hope to help others.

Teresa Fuentes, a member of the group, is an example of what they hope to accomplish — she's been attending meetings regularly, though the oldest of her three children is only 7. She wants to prevent her children from embracing the violence around them.

Esperanza member Maricruz, who did not want to give her last name, said, "You love them so much, but you don't discipline them. I didn't make them do things, and I didn't discipline them. My son says 'I'm bored in this house, I want to leave.' And he does."

Parenting classes

Ramon Cervantes, director of Fenix Services, hopes parents can learn to better discipline their children before it gets to that point.

"I'm also hearing that the parents also need help, no?" said Cervantes at a recent *Esperanza* meeting. "We love them so much,



'If we can have communication as parents, kids will say 'My mom talks to that other kid's mom, and he's a Sureño.'

— Patty Arana, counselor

sometimes we don't see their mistakes. But the family is the foundation for everything else, and the mother is the most important part. How are they going to respect their teachers in school if they don't respect their parents at home?"

The gang-related death of 19-year-old Tony Valdivia in June only reinforced what Maria Cabrera and other mothers are learning, that loving their children and being at home isn't enough.

"We as a community are afraid of what's happening now — one from our own pueblo was killed," said Cabrera.

Cabrera said she should have realized what was happening when her son began hanging out with a cousin who was a gang member.

She wasn't jolted into action un-

til her son, 18, ended up in Juvenile Hall. He now is at a boy's ranch in Arizona.

"I don't understand it — many say kids walk the streets because their parents are working. But my husband has never let me work. I've always been here worrying about my children," said Cabrera.

Even kids that get counseling or who enter group homes risk returning to destructive habits if their parents lack authority in the home.

"You're bringing the kids back into the same situation. The environment hasn't changed and the families haven't changed," Borges said. "Sometimes parents don't get the message until it's too late."

Esperanza is trying to change that, at least in their own neigh-

borhood.

As the group began its meeting, a man walked in with his defiant 12-year-old daughter. She refused to follow him in, and sat next to the door instead. The father said his daughter had begun to dress differently and hang out with a tough group of girls, and he didn't know how to reach her.

Esperanza members take field trips to agencies like Youth Services and the New School, that provide educational, counseling and substance abuse programs to teens under 18; they have "adopted" children from their neighborhood to teach them alternatives to violence; and plan to befriend mothers of rival Sureño gang members in the nearby Green Valley Trailer Park, to set examples for their children.

"Our belief is that the parents are the role models for the kids. If we can have that communication as parents, kids will say 'My mom talks to that other kid's mom, and he's a Sureño,' said Patty Arana, who works with the Alto Counseling Center and helped organize the group. Her younger brother, who lives at Green Valley Apartments, is paralyzed from a gang shooting in Salinas.

"We teach them leadership skills," Arana said. "If they start feeling part of the system, then they'll be more active in the community."

GANG LIFE

KIDS ARE DYING

Father,

Continued from Page A1

Unity Weekend. It included a downtown march through gang territories in a public demand to "stop the violence" that drew about 150 people. The group's efforts have now turned toward fighting Proposition 187, a November ballot measure that would eliminate state services to illegal immigrants.

"As the same *raza*, we have to learn to live together — this must end. One day, this barrier is going to break, so we can mix, talk and walk together — it can be done. Here, it can start," said the elder Alejo, who planned to give a similar message that night as the pastor of the Apostolic Assembly Church in Watsonville.

Many who listened were in their early 20s, yet hadn't been in school since their early teens. Alejo teaches the auto body class at the low-security facility, where inmates earn a certificate that shows they've worked on cars for 270 hours. Hopefully, that experience will land them a job when they're released.

The son of a farm worker who was an organizer with Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers, Tom Alejo tells the men he was the first in his family to graduate high school. Tom credits his father, who only made it to the third grade, for instilling in him the importance of education.

"But you did it 'cause your jefe said you could — many of us don't have jefes saying that," countered one 20-year-old inmate. "My father was never there for me, he never gave me advice, so I learned my lessons in the streets."

Luis Alejo remembered his years on the streets, as he prepared this fall to start his first year at UC Berkeley. It seemed so much longer than just a few years ago that he was just another follower dressed in a red baggy uniform.

"My friends were all into it and there was an excitement. It wasn't for protection. You do all the hate without understanding where the hate came from," said Alejo. "Eventually, I started getting busted. I got in fights and got real frustrated and depressed. I didn't take pride in what I did."

He would be arrested a few times resulting from fights, and even received a felony for a more serious offense. But the one thing that made a difference was his parents never gave up on him, he said.

While on probation, Luis took college prep courses at Watsonville High School and graduated at the top 10 percent of his class.