BELIEVE IN THE POSSIBILITY OF A WORLD WITHOUT VIOLENCE

by Pushpa Iyer and Jeanine Willig

I might be the shortest man in the gang [MS-13] but I was the most deadly.” Alex Sanchez is indeed a short man. He is completely unassuming but he is a powerful presence. He captivates his audience with his stories, which he tells with a twinkle in his eye, a lot of street slang – enough to give us an idea of the lexicon on the streets – bursts of loud laughter as he recollects his violent past (whether the laughter was an expression of his trauma or a way of laughing at his past is left to interpretation), and his courageous efforts now to reduce violence on the streets. His indomitable spirit shines through the whole time.

Alex is a “former” gang member. Former as in the fact that he no longer participates in gang activities, does not believe in force or violence and now helps broker peace between gangs while supporting individual members, especially youngsters, and teaches them how to respond without violence. However, as he explains, for years his identity was the mix of numbers and letters – MS 13 – and he is clear that it is not an identity he can shed. The gang was more than his family, it is who he was and it is who he is today. How does someone who so strongly believes in taking an alternative route to violence stick to embracing his identity as linked to one of the most violent groups? Alex is intriguing.

We met with Alex Sanchez during our 2015 field course “Praxis of Conflict Transformation” in Los Angeles. As he talked about the past, there was the feeling of it all being surreal. Here we were in a cramped little room listening to, nay seeing, scenes through the stories that Alex brought to life – and they were violent scenes. He recounts the 1992 peace initiated by the Crips and Bloods gangs, a truce that the two groups had initiated after the infamous LA riots. Wary of the changing circumstances that the truce created, he recollects being called to a summit as a member of a Latino gang that was in the red (but actually they had a green signal on them – green light meant they were targets for anyone to kill); Alex remembers being terrified when he was called into the summit. Given the task of bringing together all the existing Latino gangs – who he believes hated them, the MS 13, because they were Salvadorians – Alex initially agreed because it was the only way he knew he was getting out alive but he
also understood that in order to consolidate and reduce risk of being targeted, the Latino gangs needed to come together. He was successful and the green light was “pulled”; they were back in the red, but that was good. These series of events seemed to be the beginning of him taking leadership in brokering a truce and encouraging others to stop using force.

Although when we asked, he had three clear reasons for ending a life of violence. One, he was completely tired of it. The last time he was in prison, he said he was so fed up and just wanted to do something different and be somewhere else. Two, his first child was just born and he had full responsibility for the child. He just did not want the cycle of violence to continue. And finally, when he ended up being deported to El Salvador in that time period, he felt the violence on the streets of Los Angeles (LA) had been a joke. The violence in El Salvador was disproportionate – the state had so much more power and in that country he was a target. In his own words, “I decided to stop being part of the problem to be part of the solution to the problem.”

Alex’s reasons for leaving a life of violence seemed a natural evolution; everyone tires of doing the same thing (in his case being a gang member) and starting a new family does provide a different perspective. Yet, what is fascinating is how went about doing it.

Alex Sanchez co-founded Homies Unidos in 1996. The organization aims to turn people who were part of the problem of violence into being a solution to the violence. Homies, not homeboy, so as to be more gender inclusive, also provides free tattoo removal to erase the scars of gang identification so that kids have a second chance, a way to break free of the cycle of violence that causes pain to themselves and those around them.

Today, he is the Director of Homies Unidos. In keeping both with the spirit of the organization and his own need for change, Alex’s personal transformation did not come with him shedding his ties completely from the gang. He was advocating for a change in their strategies, he was not advocating for there to be a “no-gang” scenario. Gangs were his family, they gave him a place in this world, they gave him the space to be himself, to be with his anger and deal with it in a way he knew. It is a poignant moment when Alex talks about his mother’s abusive parenting (his mother forced religion on him) and the tremendous anger inside him. Not finding a release for all that anger would have only led him to self-destruct. As he simply put it, “I was angry and I did not know where else or how else to take out my anger.” Our question “Why did you join the gangs?” was clearly one of the most difficult and most emotional questions for him to answer.

Alex passionately describes the reasons why children and youth are drawn to gangs today. When kids are blamed for acting out in school the assumption is made that everyone comes from the same starting point. Teachers and administrators want to instill a sense of personal responsibility so the question they ask the “out of control” kids is: “What is wrong with you?” These kids are confronted with a narrative that they are bad and thus commit bad acts. No one considers that kids who grow up in bad neighborhoods attend underfunded public schools and have parents that either can’t take care of them or don’t, should be as responsible for their acts as the kids in good communities with caring parents and well-funded programs.
Once in a gang, Alex says, there is a tacit agreement that “I will let my anger out on you, and you can let your anger out on me.” The kids have so much pain and anger and hatred directed at themselves, the gang violence is a release. The gang also provides an identity, he adds. While before the kids were picked on and beat up, but once part of a gang people are afraid of them and give them respect. This sends a powerful message to the disenfranchised and abandoned children that all they need to do is put some letters and a number on their face and people will treat them like gods.

During our time in LA we heard over and over again the need to change the discourse from “what is wrong with you” to “what happened to you?” Seems like a very simple way to make people feel heard and prevent them from turning to violence.

Alex was granted political asylum in 2002 but he is still waiting to know if he can become a citizen of the United States. Today Alex acts as mediator between gang members, supports those who chose an alternative lifestyle to the gangs by connecting them to available resources, mentors youth and basically keeps in touch with everyone who are seen as being “on the wrong side of law.” How does he manage to do what he does without constantly being at risk of being attached by various gang members? “If you give respect then you get respect. I have always respected those under me and those above me, that is my secret.” The law enforcement he says are of course “out to get him” and in fact he was arrested on conspiracy charges in 2009, a case brought forth by LAPD, FBI and immigration authorities. His supporters, who claimed his peacemaker status, threatened authorities and led the “We are Alex” campaign. They were successful; he was out on bail.
He is a leader and loves being one and that is obvious. Why not lead a quiet life? Why does he put himself out there? He responds, “I love attention” and it is why I thrive on the attention my work draws from law enforcement, immigration authorities, gang members and others. If I had gone my mother’s route, I might have become a Bishop or something like that!” and there is another burst of laughter.

Alex sees the raw power of gang brokered truce (referring to 92/93 and other subsequent truces) to bring down the violence without the intervention of police or city officials, and it is what makes him believe in the power of the gangs to solve the problems that they cause. The gangs themselves were more powerful to stop violence than anyone on the outside, including the police or politicians. “No law enforcement or politician can take credit for what we ended,” he says.

Would he choose a different life if he had an opportunity to do this all over again? There is a pause and he says: “No.” And mostly because, “I may not exist today if it weren’t for the gang.” Alex sees a lot of hope for the future. He is in good health and has reached out to thousands of youth to turn their lives around and to reject violence as the main means of communication. He spoke with great openness about his continued spiritual journey to find his “sacred purpose.” He says, “You have to find your sacred purpose in life, i feel like I am close to finding mine, I know where I come from, I know who I am.” Alex is fighting two battles at once, to find legitimacy in the eyes of the state and the police, and to fight the power structure of the gangs to bring about peace. And he insists as we leave, “I am at peace.”

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The Rancho Cielo Youth Campus is a 501c(3) nonprofit whose mission is to partner with our local community to transform the lives of at-risk youth and empower them to become accountable, competent, productive and responsible citizens. With a homicide rate that far exceeds those of much larger cities, Salinas has become the epicenter of some of the worst gang violence in the nation. Rancho Cielo’s efforts combat this violence with education and job training.