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Teen gang member warns of accepting consequences

By Candi M. Lopez / El Paso Times
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Two tattoos - three dots arranged in a triangle, along with the semblance of a simple rosary - permanently adorn 14-year-old Emilio Marquez's left hand.

"I got ranked into Westside Locs (gang) when I was 6 years old," Marquez said as he occasionally made eye contact, his gaze alternating between his inked hand and the floor.

Marquez, an admitted gang member from Albuquerque and a father-to-be, recently shared his firsthand account of the pitfalls of gang affiliation with El Paso teens and parents.

"If you're going to be in a gang, you better think about the consequences you are going to have. If you like being locked up, away from your family and everything else, go for it," Marquez said.

"Where are your homies going to be when you're locked up? I've been locked up four months already. Where are my homies at? They ain't there with me," Marquez said.

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Marquez, accompanied by a case manager from the New Mexico Teen Pregnancy Coalition, was released on a day pass from a Las Cruces detention center to visit El Paso.

"I was going to stab my dad," Marquez said of his most recent arrest on Oct. 13, and the day he learned he was going to become a father.

He also listed violation of probation and possession of marijuana among the reasons for his detention.

Marquez spoke to teens as part of Operation No Gangs, an El Paso-based

program which, according to its director, Rob Gallardo, aims to teach teens in El Paso and New Mexico basic common courtesy.

"It may seem like a far-fetched issue, but if kids are more considerate about the community, there's less crime," said Gallardo, who founded the program in California in 1996 before returning to El Paso in 1999.

Marquez referred to his father's imprisonment, his parents' divorce and his witnessing domestic violence at home at ages 6 and 7 as a lead-in to seeking the camaraderie and acceptance of an Albuquerque gang.

"First time I got arrested, I was 7 years old for stealing a car with my homie. I've been doing drugs since I was 7. I started smoking bud (marijuana)," Marquez said.

The teen also said he was introduced to cocaine at age 9 and received an "eight ball" of cocaine from fellow gang members for his 12th birthday. "We just started doing line after line after line."

Gallardo, who graduated from Stanford University with a degree in sociology, attributes this type of behavior to some parents' inattention.

"Parents have no clue if (their children are) smoking marijuana or they've been involved in sexual activity, simply because they weren't monitoring or weren't involved."

Gallardo said youths need to be engaged by adults who are caring and responsible.

"Everybody can do this, not just me - doesn't take a degree, doesn't take any kind of special training. It's just being available to kids and showing you care and being respectful to them," Gallardo said.

El Paso police Officer Curtis Whitener said teens he comes across often are bright, yet lack life experience.

"I meet children that make bad decisions because they're not fully aware of the consequences, because they are not operating from a mature standpoint," Whitener said. "We all go through a growth and learning process."

Marquez cited family responsibilities and help from the program as a step toward breaking his gang affiliation.

"I'm trying to separate myself now because I have a baby on the way. Seeing all the hurt I put my mom through I'm pledging to do the right thing. Correct what I've done in the past."

Marquez, who said his father is also a gang member and has been in prison 22 years, has goals of "finishing school, staying clean and being a good dad that I never had."

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Get help

- Operation No Gangs meetings are offered in El Paso once a month and in Anthony, N.M., every Tuesday.
- Information: Rob Gallardo, 239-1997, or visit www.operationnogangs.org.

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