



Initiatives in Action: Youth Success Initiative



We can do more together.

Getting out of the Gang

My 12th birthday wasn't typical. Instead of a cake and presents, my older cousins initiated me into their gang. I looked up to them; they were family, and honestly, I didn't really have a choice. Unfortunately, that decision I made as a kid changed my life forever.

For a number of years, I felt like one of the cool kids. That's why kids join gangs, to feel like they are part of something. I didn't just feel accepted, I felt powerful.

They gave me a gun; they gave me drugs. I basically did whatever my cousins told me.

I quickly climbed the ranks. My main job was a drug runner. Because of this job, I earned a lot of respect. People were afraid of me. If I said something, people would listen. It felt good. People knew if they didn't listen, we'd come to their house and pull our guns.

Being a gangster is a lifestyle addiction. The language, the clothing, the music, the cash are all so addicting. I had family members, my cousins, telling me it was ok to be bad.

It took me five years to figure out that I wasn't respected because of who I was, but because of what the gang was. I learned that one the hard way and I have so many regrets.

Most kids are preyed upon because of broken homes or lack of a father figure. I didn't have that excuse. I come from a good family and my involvement in the gang almost destroyed my parents and my younger brothers and sister.

I used to come home bruised and bleeding from fights. I used to run into our house, waving my gun around. I was putting their lives in danger. I know I really scared them.

At that time nothing mattered but the gang. Things got really bad with my dad. We lived in the same house and didn't speak for three years.

One night, everything changed.

During one of our missions, one of the new guys in our gang pulled me aside and said he wanted out. I told him that was impossible, but he told me to come to this cool group with him. I was curious. The group was run by "GRASP" (Gang Rescue and Support Project). It was cool



Faustino's anti-gang support group and tattoo removal programs are funded by Mile High United Way's Youth Success Initiative.

Getting out of the Gang - cont.

because ex-gang members who broke free of the lifestyle and turned their lives around were the ones running it.

After that first meeting, I knew I needed to get out.

Trying to get out of the gang was nearly impossible. It took me a year. A lot of people didn't like me. I had to leave Colorado for almost a year because my life was in danger. Half of my friends are locked up. I'm lucky.

A year ago, there were 15 people in group, now there are more than 40. I attend every week and it has saved my life.

We take turns leading discussions; it's whatever we want to talk about. Responsibility is a big topic and also what it means to be a man, and how to behave. We learn about different points of view and what it really means to pay the consequences of gang involvement.

“ I was in the gang for so long. That's all I knew. I feel like I've been given a second chance at life and GRASP has been a huge part of that. ”

In addition to group, I'm also enrolled in GRASP's tattoo removal program. When you're in a gang, tattoos are a huge part of who you are. You earn them by completing missions and proving how tough you are. I have six homemade tattoos, mostly on my arms and hands, but one on my face too. After 15 hours of required community service, we start the removal with lasers. It hurts, but after a few more passes, they'll be gone.

It's a slow process, but when I look in the mirror, I already see a different guy. I think that's really important; I can feel my identity changing for the better.

Because of GRASP, I'm healing on the outside and inside. I smile more. I feel like my view was so narrow before, like tunnel vision. Group has helped me learn how to communicate. My parents look at me differently now. I need to be a role model for my younger brothers and sister. I know I'm no longer a bad influence on them. I'm volunteering through church and giving back to the community that I hurt. It feels really good.

In any situation, I used to go for the easiest way out. I don't do that anymore. I'm slowly becoming who I was before all this gang stuff. I'm learning that it's ok to just be me.

Most important, I feel a driving force to keep at school until I graduate in 2010. I was doing pretty well on my GED, so they let me back into my old high school. Now, the gang members just ignore me for deserting them. It's better that way. I'm smarter now. I actually like studying; I really like math. Now, there is nothing holding me back from success.

At 17 years old, I feel like I've been through a lifetime already. But, I feel great and I finally feel safe.

I was in the gang for so long. That's all I knew. I feel like I've been given a second chance at life and GRASP has been a huge part of that.

Programs like GRASP's gang support group and tattoo removal program are supported by Mile High United Way's Youth Success initiative. Please help more people like me and donate to United Way.

For more information about our Youth Success Initiative, please visit our website at www.unitedwaydenver.org.

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