

# Program gives gang members hope for future

DETROIT (AP) — Antonio Rivera strutted through the door dripping with a gold necklace, gold rings, and a gold earring. He talked in slang laced with vulgarities and an edge, the kind acquired during a life of dealing drugs and doing time.

Inside, he found Alex Montaner. And his future.

Rivera was searching for a new life, one with a respectable job that would help him be a better father. Montaner gave him GRACE - Gang Retirement and Continued Education. The program trains troubled teens and ex-cons for 30 days in basic workplace and life skills, then helps them find jobs.

Two years later at age 26, the man who once commanded a \$19,000-a-week drug trade said he is content making \$13.50 an hour, plus commissions, selling plastic guardrails. He has a 1995 Camaro and a three-bedroom house in the suburbs. He also has commitments to get his high school equivalency diploma and to marry the mother of

his 7-year-old son.

On the job, he wears a polo shirt with the company logo and slacks and dress shoes, and talks eloquently of his turnaround. Away from it, he's a family man who preaches his story to gang members and other troubled kids.

"When you sit down and look at it, being involved in gangs only leads to two places — death or prison," he said. "I know that what I'm doing I'm doing right. I proved myself, and I believe others can, too."

This is from a guy who once expected to die young, and violently. A ninth-grade dropout, Rivera was on the streets all night at age 12, running with a gang by 13 and peddling marijuana at 15 and crack cocaine at 17.

Along the way, Rivera collected a scar from a stab wound on his back along with five guns, convinced "I've got to get them before they get me."

And he kept it all secret from Nevia Nieves, a single mother who was on welfare and who feared for her four

children in a neighborhood where the staccato of gunfire often had her diving for cover.

"I would spend hours on my knees crying out to God that when the phone would ring, I wouldn't be called out to identify my boys," she says now.

Then it all imploded, and Rivera spent more than four years in prison on drug and weapons charges. It gave him plenty of time to think — chiefly about his son, whose image and that of the boy's mother are tattooed on his chest. He decided to change.

But when he searched for a job after prison, he found employers had no interest in an ex-con who wore jeans, T-shirts and lots of cologne to job interviews. Rejected and dejected, he was tempted to return to the drug trade.

Then he met Montaner and impressed him with his dedication to being a responsible family man.

Enter GRACE — the program that teaches ex-gang members and ex-cons to write resumes, resolve conflicts without a gun, shake hands the conventional way rather

than street way of rapid-fire grasps. They learn how to use an alarm clock, how not to wear tilted hats to job interviews.

Even some of their street skills get put to use. Through their dealings of drugs and guns, one-time kings of the streets are versed in business concepts like hierarchies, marketing and sales, security and strategy.

"There are a lot of skills that go into being a leader on the street," Montaner says. "If you redirect that energy into the workforce, it can be positive and productive."

But first, he says, "They have to learn work ethics. We teach life skills in addition to work readiness."

Rivera spent \$300 for his first suit, a gray-and-black number that made him feel awkward until "people told me I looked good in it. That gave me motivation." He bought dress shoes for \$70.

GRACE refined his speech through language classes that he says "helped get the ghetto out of me."

"It was a struggle because words at first came out that I

didn't want to — cussing words and things like that," he says. "Changing the way I spoke didn't come overnight."

"He speaks like a very well-educated man. He has the vocabulary; it was just a matter of using it," says Angie Reyes of the Detroit Hispanic Development Corp., GRACE's parent organization.

The temptation to revert to his former life has been tempered, he said, because most of his old friends are either in prison or facing charges.

And there's his ultimate motivation: his son, Antonio.

"He loves his son with all his being," Rivera's mother says. "He has hurt like a parent now, so he understands."

Rivera works at Ideal Shield in the Hispanic Manufacturing Center, a coalition of companies that has about 380 workers — 20 percent, or about 75 of them ex-gang members or felons.

"We don't give guys 86 chances," Ideal owner Frank Venegas says. "But once they

get the taste of money and the chance to be legitimate, it's absolutely incredible what you come up with."

Adds brother Loren Venegas, Rivera's boss: "It definitely takes managing and coaching, which we all get in some way." But it pays off: "We do customer surveys and they come back, 'Great working with Antonio.'"

Getting to work by 8 a.m. each workday hasn't been a struggle for the guy who in prison had to be up by 6:30 a.m. And Rivera's worked hard, winning a promotion from production to sales and not disappointing, once using his Spanish at a Chicago trade show to win a contract from a Hispanic who didn't speak English.

At home, his bride-to-be, Nancy Castro, says Rivera is making up lost time with her and their son. "That's all he looks forward to — to seeing his son every day," she says.

Rivera says it's been a challenge. "But with everybody helping me and my striving forward, I'm doing OK. 'Everything's falling into place.'"

## Violence

(Continued from Page 1)

\$185,000 in court-ordered reimbursements.

"We think we can do better," Juaristi said. "There are just too many kids being arrested despite the school district's zero tolerance program and school police."

Von Tobel uses various programs targeted at helping at-risk youth. They include Teens, Crime and the Community, Ace out Drugs, outdoor adventure club, tutorials, Read 180, and Ruby Payne's Hidden Rules of Generational Poverty. An emphasis is put on mediation to resolve conflicts and avoid discipline.

"This (mediation) is really a good tool if the kids use it. Its really effective in the elementary schools," said Sgt. Ken Young, of the Clark County School District Police Department. "When they (students) sit down and talk about it...they see that it's nothing but he-say, she-say and the argument is over."

"Getting around the discipline is wrong," eighth-grader John Babb said of the mediation program. "Kids should pay for what they do wrong." Schools, police and lawmakers will use the report to erect crime-reducing policies and regulations. Those interested in more information or a copy of the report can call 895-1040.

## Library symposium focuses on job barriers

John T. Stephens III  
Sentinel-Voice

The Professional Black Women's Alliance is hosting a symposium entitled "Smashing the Glass Ceiling," on Saturday from 11 a.m.-1 p.m., at the West Las Vegas Library, located at 951 West Lake Mead.

Strategies and techniques for breaking the glass ceiling will be offered by a panel of experts who have transcended the invisible wall.

"The glass ceiling is the professional level that you cannot rise to in a corporation," said PBWA Spokesperson Faye Duncan-Daniel.

"Sometimes it's (glass ceiling) real; sometimes it's imaginary ... we (PBWA) will make it all real."

In its 15th year, PBWA was formed to recognize the contributions of women of color in society and the need for them to network, share resources and information to take their place as positive role models in corporate and social America.

"We want to bring out excellence," Daniel said. "You have to be a champion. ... Every champion trains harder."

Also in attendance to share their stories of how they "smashed the glass ceiling" will be: Carol Jackson, State Job Training Officer; Gloria Banks Weddle of Corporate Nevada Power; Hannah Brown of Hannah Brown & Associates; Joni Flowers of Community College of Southern Nevada; and, stockbroker Nicole Lovely.

The event is free of charge and PBWA is requesting all participants bring their resumes to help determine if they are a victim of the glass ceiling phenomenon.

For more information please call 631-0000.

### CITY OF NORTH LAS VEGAS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

## PUBLIC NOTICE

NORTH LAS VEGAS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT BLOCK GRANT APPLICATIONS are available by pick-up only starting on Tuesday, October 12, 1999 at City of North Las Vegas Grants Administration Division, 2266 Civic Center Drive, North Las Vegas, Nevada 09030. Application forms are now available for non-profit organizations which have been granted a 501(c)(3) status by the Federal Internal Revenue Service. Applications must be returned by November 13, 1998 at 5:00 p.m. to the City of North Las Vegas, Grants Administration Division by November 16, 1999 at 5:45 p.m.

Community Development funds must be used by non-profit organizations which meet a Community Development Block Grant national objective. These eligible projects and activities must serve low/moderate income residents of the city of North Las Vegas.

For further information, contact Carlota Cloud, Grants Administration (702) 633-1531.

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