

Daniel “Nane” Alejandrez

Statement to the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America’s Prisons.

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Thank you, and good morning.

I would first like to start by thanking those involved in convening these hearings. When I was first contacted to testify before this commission, I was a little excited about the opportunity to speak on an issue very close and personal to me. When I was given the questions to address, I wasn’t as excited and had some concerns, although I didn’t want to pass up an opportunity to address such an important subject.

I would like to take a few moments to speak about Barrios Unidos. Santa Cruz Barrios Unidos began in 1977 as a grassroots movement to bring awareness and alternatives to the growing problems of youth violence in our communities. Our belief is that community workers who have experienced and overcome the challenges facing young people today are best able to assist them in choosing life-affirming behaviors. We focus on building positive self-esteem and cultural pride through meaningful activities, education, and job training. Santa Cruz Barrios Unidos programs are generated out of three separate areas, The Cesar E. Chavez School for Social Change, Community Outreach and Economic Development. Together, these areas enable Barrios Unidos to service our local communities. Our vision of safer and stronger communities can only be realized by leaders who are not afraid to face today’s challenges prudently and expediently. To deny or ignore that gangs exist only empowers the enemy of our children. We must learn to work together and share in the responsibility of stopping the violence in our communities.

To address the topics of gangs and why prisoners join gangs is not an easy task. In almost thirty years of organizing in different barrios and institutions, I am still searching for answers to these questions. I’ve always believed that if we were to have an impact that our work would have to be behind prison walls. In the last fifteen years we have been involved in providing support to cultural groups in prison. Through the invitation of these

groups we are now in several institutions and a national correspondence project is in place.

Why an individual joins a gang has been defined by many and thoroughly analyzed in research and academia.

I think some causes for individuals to join a Prison Gang is when they initially come into the system, it's primarily with fear. They don't know what to expect; they've never been locked up before. Some are already in neighborhood gangs before prison. Some have been born into it. Some individuals join because they want to be part of an elite inner circle at all costs. Prison gangs are highly organized, with sophisticated rules and regulations. They have their own laws, oaths, and constitutions. The gang not only provides protection; it becomes a way of life, driven by strong ideological convictions. Others join because they are placed in those positions to join, based on where they came from and whom they associate themselves with. Prison Gang members may also select some individuals when they demonstrate a sense of promise or value.

“When I first went to Pelican Bay,” says Willie, “you're like so fascinated by ‘Oh, here's all these guys you've always heard about, all these guys who run everything.’ You're just fascinated with it all. And you hear the way they talk, Aztec language, just all this knowledge and philosophy from reading all this stuff. ‘Oh, I want to be like that, I want to be smart and educated like he sounds.’ Unfortunately, some that join never make it out. Others realize this is not what they really wanted.”

Cultural and Spiritual Transformation

While we cannot control all the factors that lead to incarceration with the judicial system, we can control and change the way we detain and provide services, especially to minorities. No single reform strategy can alter the current policy and trends with our correctional system. By focusing on things that we can change and improve with regards to culturally relevant cognitive behavioral treatment models, then we can make a huge difference in the outcome, focusing on effective programming and diverting their exit

from locked facilities in ways that make programming relevant, meaningful and successful.

Barrios Unidos incorporates a unique approach and promotes cultural, physical, and spiritual healing for individuals involved in negative activity. This must not be interpreted as a religious based or indoctrination in a particular religion. By promoting spirituality, we are focusing on inner-self development and the connection one must make to begin the healing process, a necessary first step in self-transformation.

As a direct result of this approach, participants gain encouragement, knowledge and healing through a process utilizing indigenous teaching and ceremonies. Emphasis is placed on cultivating an in-depth awareness and appreciation of their cultural and spiritual heritage. The goal is to provide participants with additional and alternative tools to leave the negative environments so they may begin the healing process and continue the journey of self-transformation. They also assess the role of violence and drugs in their lives and consider non-violent alternatives, increasing the likelihood of success among participants and providing re-entry linkages to local services and reducing the length of time incarcerated. This approach also strengthens family support and promotes a healthy integration back into the community.

My work in the institutions has been that of great satisfaction. To see individuals change before you, for the betterment of human kind, is a blessing and hope for the future. The men/prisoners who organize the Cinco de Mayo, Juneteenth, and Native Pow Wow ceremonies within the prison system are a true testament of courage to change the madness of violence that has unnecessarily claimed many lives. We must all come together to search for better ways to deal with the ills of our society — whether poor or wealthy, we can create a better world for our children.

Thank you very much.