

An Open Letter to the Young Gang Members in Texas

Editors Note: *This letter was written by a county Family Counselor to gang member detainees in a Juvenile Detention Center. She shares her personal insights into the minds of young offenders coupled with the anguish and frustration she experiences after counseling hundreds of gang members, and for some, becoming a surrogate mother.*

Dear Morris, Jack, Frankie, Scott, Rebecca, Johnny, Brian, Chrissy, Fernando, Ruben, Jason, Maurice, Victoria, Christian, and all the children that came before you, and all the children who will come after you: Rest in peace Chrissy, Jack, Jason, and Ruben.

First, let me tell you that I'm sorry. I'm sorry for all your pain, for your sorrow, and for your aloneness. I admire your sense of humor, your ability to continue to find some joy in life, and your never-ending pursuit of peace, no matter what the cost. I admire your ability to laugh at yourself, and the inner strength you must have when you greet each day through sober eyes.

I'm afraid of your anger, and respectful of your rage. You comfort and nurture your anger and rage with drugs and alcohol. Searching and searching and hoping and praying that the right combination will make the pain and aloneness go away. And it does, temporarily, only to return with a vengeance ... demanding to be heard, or silenced, again. You almost always choose to silence it.

You desperately attempt to find in your friends what you long for and do not get from your family. You want and need unconditional love and acceptance from at least one person who will/can nurture and care for your physical and emotional needs. You simply want one person you can count on, just one. That person does not exist in your world.

It took me three long years to get to know you. And, I can still be surprised. I continue to ask and probe and question in an attempt to learn how you got to be in the place you are in. Many of you are weary of "the system" and spit out only the answers you believe to be in your own

best interest - a survival skill you've perfected, I might add. Many of you answered honestly. Here I am, an adult, female figure, who won't hurt, harm, or judge you. I wonder if you're wondering if this is what a mother is.

Here is my question, if you'll indulge my selfishness. After three long years and hundreds and hundreds of children later, I need to know what role I play in your lives. And, does it matter?

My present dilemma is that a strategic marriage and family therapist is never supposed to take credit for change. So if there is any change in your life, you did it, not me. Perhaps the problem that I'm having is that I never see change in your life. And I'm wondering what that has to do with me. If the strategic therapist never takes credit, why should I feel bad about no change? Why am I feeling somehow personally responsible when you are returned to your criminal, abusive, and neglectful families?

The present system dictates that, not me. It's not my fault you're going to spend several years in prison, Morris. Is it? Could I have said something, ANYTHING, to you the first time you were in juvenile detention to prevent you from leaving and murdering another "gang" child? What could I have possibly done or said? And, if the answer to that is "nothing," then what is my purpose in your life? What?

I wonder if there was a specific moment in time when it became clear to you that you were truly alone. And, I wonder if it was this realization that helped you make the decision to join your "gang". You must have had to summon all of the strength within yourself to make believe that the "gang" is your mother, your father, your sister, and your brother. You were wise enough to know that no one can survive in your world alone. And since the gods didn't provide for your basic needs, you manufactured your own family.

With your uncanny sense of survival, lots and lots of drugs, and the unspoken agreement among "gangs" never to reveal the truth, you

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have managed to keep the fantasy alive. The lie, and the manufactured "family" became too big and too out of control. If you admit that your "gang" is a fake family, then you will have to face the fact that you are truly alone, just as you always have been.

The major flaw with your "gang family" is that all the members are exactly alike. Everyone is seeking to be nurtured and loved by the "mother" or "father," but everyone is a child. No one in the "family" has the capacity to nurture or love. When your needs are not taken care of, again, this becomes another major disappointment for you. And the anger and rage continues to build.

The "gang" children understand each others feelings and are bonded by their anger and give each other permission to rage. With no parental figure, no guidance, and no one to help you distinguish between right and wrong, the "gang" children lash out at each other - and anyone they please. You feel somehow justified in your violence. If you cannot get what you need, then you will take what you want.

If your family is a fake and a fraud, why not other things? You begin to claim as your own, "hoods" that clearly belong to Uncle Sam, "signs" that are used by the hearing impaired, and "colors" that belong to everyone. Oh yes, I forgot, it's your fantasy. And between you, your drugs, and your "gang," you can maintain the fantasy until something breaks, and something always breaks.

As time passes, you begin to realize that mom simply doesn't exist, not in real life, and not in the fantasy that you so carefully constructed in your mind. There is no one that can fill that void in your soul. Perhaps that's why you took your own lives, Jack, Jason, and Ruben. And only God knows why three "gang" children took your life, Chrissy.

12/31/97, 1/1/98, 1/2/98, 1/4/98, 1/5/98, 1/9/98 . . . and here I am, the kindly, well-meaning stranger. My guess is that the "system" has been an integral part of your

family, for most of your life. You've already met this kindly stranger in the form of a caseworker, a probation officer, and the government agent who monitors your S.S.I. checks, to name a few. I met you at the juvenile detention center. I was your counselor. Your crimes range from stealing a CD at Super K -Mart, to murder. Some of you have murdered more than one person.

I'm not asking the other well-meaning strangers in your life because I know they will proclaim that we have a positive effect on your life and all of our efforts and hard work will payoff. I've concluded that my role in your life really is simply to calm you down and make your stay at juvenile detention as comfortable as possible.

Is that enough for you? Is that enough for me? Do I have the right to want more? It is difficult to be in a helping profession and feel, day after day after day, that I have helped no one.

I keep seeing this image of an average size band-aid on a large, gushing wound. I believe that you forgive my ignorance, and find momentary peace in the fact that a kindly stranger is interested in gently placing a band-aid on your large, gushing wound -- the wound that took you an entire lifetime to acquire. You know that I don't have a magic band-aid. And yet, you are somehow comforted by my gesture.

There is always a moment when I see you looking deep into my eyes as though you're searching for something. There have been so many times in your life that you have been tricked and fooled, could this be another? No. You allow yourself to trust me, let your guard down, and savor the time we spend together. At that moment we both know that you've shared a piece of your soul that you thought had been destroyed long ago. We also know that this may never happen again.

There is a calm and peacefulness that occurs simultaneously with your sadness and hopelessness. You seem puzzled that you are having all these feelings. You search my eyes

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again to reassure yourself that I will not take advantage of you in this vulnerable state. No. I won't. Confidentiality becomes paramount, because you perceive this as a moment of weakness, and there are no weak survivors in your world.

More and more of the children that I counsel are allowing themselves to be nurtured. And it is becoming increasingly more difficult for me to separate myself from the calm, peaceful, sad, and hopeless feelings that are so intensely shared in therapy. I believe that your sadness and hopelessness come from the knowledge that there are no band-aids on the streets or in your homes, and a vulnerable moment could mean death. That is not my reality, or the reality of my friends and family. Therefore, I am touched by the bond you feel toward me after we have met, and talked.

Perhaps my role in your life is to show you that you have the capacity to be nurtured and cared for. And that despite all the hostile, angry, and violent behaviors you have armed yourself with, you are still a child. And with this knowledge, you will be receptive to the help offered you by the other kindly, well-meaning strangers you will encounter in your life.

“Juvenile Detention Counselor, M.Ed., LPC”



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