

JOBS NO



HOMEBOY INDUSTRIES EMBRACES,
GANG MEMBERS FOR THE WORK FOR

T JAILS



NURTURES, AND TRAINS FORMER
FORCE—AND A BETTER FUTURE

BY JAN JOHNSON

“IN THIS PLACE OF WHICH YOU SAY, ‘IT IS A WASTE . . .’ THERE SHALL ONCE MORE BE HEARD THE VOICE OF MIRTH AND THE VOICE OF GLADNESS . . . THE VOICES OF THOSE WHO SING.”

JEREMIAH 33:10-11

Let’s say you hear about a job site where 85 percent of the workers are on probation or parole from prison. What chance of survival would you give such an enterprise? Then let’s say all these workers are former members of rival gangs and have killed each others’ friends. What would you imagine the atmosphere of that job site to be?

This is Homeboy Industries, the largest gang intervention program in the United States. Founded by Father Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit priest, Homeboy assists at-risk and former gang-involved youth in Los Angeles in becoming contributing members of the community through jobs in its own businesses, job training, and job placement. Yet above all else, Homeboy is a community of people committed to one another, providing youth an array of services that address their various acute needs. When Homeboy Industries helps these former gang members redirect their lives and find hope for the future, everybody wins.

It all began in 1986 when Gregory Boyle was appointed pastor of Dolores Mission in a neighborhood of East Los Angeles, where he served through 1992. The parents of Dolores Mission—the poorest parish in Los Angeles, located among thousands of low-income apartments—continually came to Boyle requesting help for their kids who were in gangs. So Father Greg, eventually called “G-Dog” or “Father G” or simply “G” by the homies (in gang parlance, a “dog” is someone who stands by you no matter what), began patrolling the projects at night, riding his bike. His reception was chilly until he began visiting the homies when they were locked up in jail or wounded in the hospital.

In 1988 Boyle launched Jobs for a Future (JFF). Besides establishing a daycare program and an alternative high school (where one principal lasted only a day), this parish-led program worked to find legitimate employment for young people. Its success shaped the model followed today, which demonstrates that many gang members are secretly eager

to leave the danger and destruction of gang life.

During that time Boyle’s philosophy began to shift. “We don’t work with gangs here, we work with gang members,” says Boyle. “In the old days I used to work on gang peace treaties and cease-fires, but I don’t do that anymore. I don’t want to validate the gang or supply oxygen to gangs. Now it’s one gang member at a time.”

To reach those individuals, Boyle says Mass and speaks at 25 regional youth camps, jails, and prisons. In conversations following his talks, he stands ready to hand out a card with his name and phone number on it. He invites young



Fresh, wholesome breads and pastries from Homeboy Bakery’s ovens are sold at 20 farmers’ markets in the greater Los Angeles area.



Homegirl Café employs former gang members and serves, in part, organic produce grown at the Homegirl Gardens.

men and women to call him when they get out, offering to hook them up with a job, provide tattoo removal, and line them up with a counselor.

Each year about 8,000 former gang members from over 800 gangs come through Homeboy's doors seeking help to make a positive change. An additional 4,000 gang-affiliated family and community members also come seeking help.

As executive director of Homeboy Industries, Boyle has become a nationally known speaker and a consultant to youth services and governmental agencies, policymakers, and employers. In his frequent travels—he gives about 200 talks a year all over the country—he usually takes homies with him, an experience that can prove life-changing in itself. Boyle and several homies were featured speakers at the White House Conference on Youth in 2005, at the invitation of Laura Bush. Yet he's still just "Father G." Past the glass-fronted reception desk of the Homeboy Industries building, he can often be found talking with homies in his office.

HOMEBOYS MAKE GOOD

In response to the 1992 race-related riots in Los Angeles, Jobs for a Future launched its first in-house business, Homeboy Bakery, in an abandoned bakery across the street from its office. It provided training, work experience, and, above all, the opportunity for rival gang members to work side by side. The success of the bakery provided the groundwork for additional businesses, thus prompting JFF in 2001 to become an independent nonprofit organization, which they called Homeboy Industries. It has since grown into a national model. Its new headquarters, completed in 2007, is a two-story, 21,000-square-foot facility, most of which houses the bakery, a restaurant (Homegirl Café), and a retail store (Homeboy Merchandise). It is also headquarters to Homeboy Industries itself, as well as its solar panel installation training and certification program. This \$8.5 million dollar building is located in gang-neutral territory in an industrial area with a view of LA's city hall in the background. Homeboy Silkscreen and Embroidery is located about one mile off campus.

Hector Verdugo knows this part of the city, and its culture of hopelessness, well. "All my family members were gang members and drug addicts," he explains. "My father died a week before my twin and I were born. Gang members were always in our home, so we saw their lifestyle firsthand. I remember as a small child holding a real gun and being amazed at how heavy it was."

As Verdugo grew older, he began to participate in gang life, first going along for the ride and then moving on to home robbery. "In the beginning it's fun and crazy, but then death starts coming around you when your friends get killed. Then you want to drink, do more drugs, and hurt more people. You admire gang life and hate it at same time."

Eventually Verdugo became a drug dealer—two years of prison had provided the "business school" opportunity to learn how to move drugs across the country and maximize



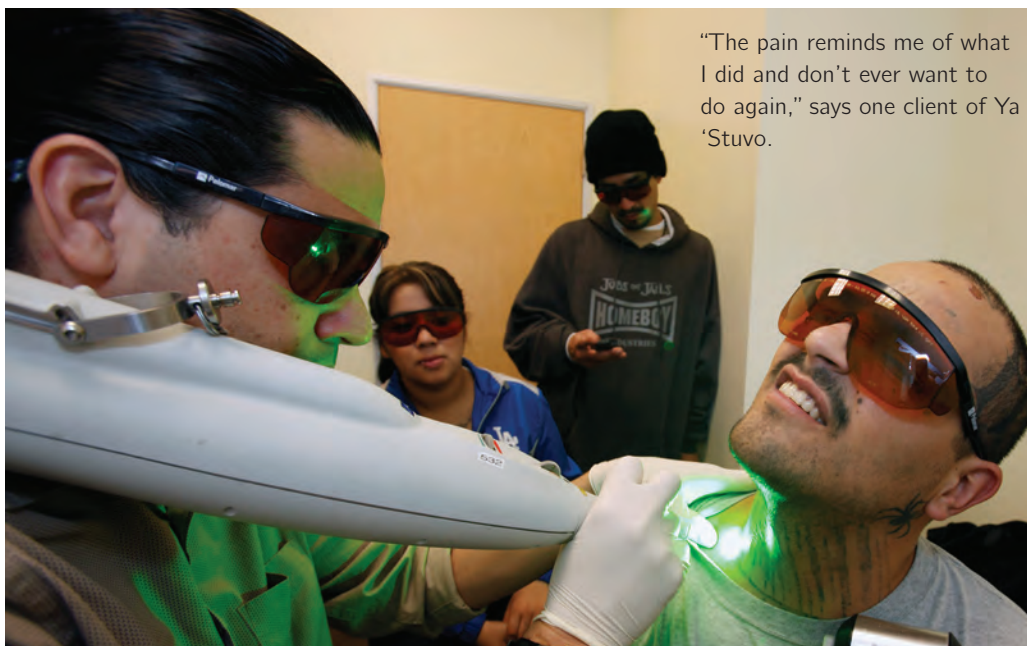
Homeboy Merchandise offers a wide array of casual wear and accessories emblazoned with their popular logos. The on-site store is staffed by former gang members and at-risk youth, who learn business management, inventory control, sales, and promotional skills.

profit. He lived the high life. "With money, I could go out of my neighborhood. To others, that's nothing, but to us it was everything. I bought a van, filled it up with my homeboys, went to the beach, on shopping sprees up and down Rodeo Drive, buying whatever we wanted, clothes and watches." He paid \$12,000 for a home stereo system. "It was ridiculous," he says in retrospect, but it couldn't disguise the pain that lay beneath his genuine yearning for freedom.

"What comes with this life is the understanding that you're hurting people through the drugs you sell," says Verdugo. "I know what drugs do to families, so that got on my conscience. There was always a lifeline of spirituality inside me, but I had to ignore it. I would justify my drug dealing—I'm not selling to my people in the projects—but my conscience started talking to me. God would say, 'These are people.' That started messing with me."

"I never stepped foot in high school, but I knew I had something in me to make it work without doing this," Verdugo explains. Tired of the "network of hurt," he tried to "go legit" with a restaurant and a construction business, but found it difficult. "The legit life is harder than the illegitimate life," he says. "You got to pay workman's comp. If someone says no, you can't forcefully make them say yes. You have to do marketing, make cold calls. It was a whole different thing. I failed in it."

One day, when all his construction equipment froze at the same time, he said, "OK, God. What do you want me to do?"



"The pain reminds me of what I did and don't ever want to do again," says one client of Ya 'Stuvo.

REMOVING THE GANG MEMBER BADGE

One of the more unusual Homeboy services is Ya 'Stuvo tattoo removal program. (Ya 'Stuvo means "That's enough, I'm done with that.") It's not unusual for tattoos to cover shaved heads, the length of arms, and even faces. Because tattoos are the ultimate gang-affiliated statement, their removal is an important step in the journey out of gang life and into positive social integration. Without tattoos, they are no longer identified as gang members and can more easily find jobs.

Using laser tattoo removal machines, a team of volunteer physicians perform about 5,000 treatments a year. Ya 'Stuvo continues to be a critical entry point for many clients, who come in for tattoo removal and then learn of the additional services offered.

Homeboy employee Ray Moreno has had tattoos removed eight times. "It's painful, but it gives me a fresh start," he says. "The pain reminds me of what I did and don't ever want to do again."

Homeboy employees can be suspended for getting a new tattoo, and priority is given to juveniles 13-14 years old to help them avoid deepening their tie to the gangs. The demand for tattoo removal continues to grow: In 2004, 675 clients had tattoos removed at the Homeboy facility; three years later, 1,151 clients sought Homeboy's services.

"I was miserable—trying to make it work on a bad foundation," continues Verdugo. "I was on sand when I should have been on rock. I started to get drunk and party. My relationship with my kids was bad. I didn't know what God wanted me to do. A friend said, 'Go talk to Father G.' I'd met him in juvenile hall years before. I couldn't believe he was still around."

When Verdugo met with Father Greg, he thought maybe the priest could pull some strings and get him into college. But Boyle said, "No, I want you to work for me." Verdugo refused to take up a slot at Homeboy, saying he could find a job elsewhere. Boyle insisted, "I want you to work here. God wants you to work here."

"Who's going to argue with God?" Verdugo thought, so he went to work at Homeboy. "I felt good. I felt right. I'd been waiting for that feeling. Then I found out what my pay was!" he exclaims—\$8 an hour. "I wondered how I would make it. But I felt like I was living in the gospels when Jesus fed the 5,000 with a few loaves of bread."

"I've been here ever since," he concludes. "I'm a rich man now. I've gotten custody of my kids. I love my job."

JOBS MEAN COMMUNITY, HOPE

A distinctive feature of Homeboy Industries is its small businesses, in which difficult-to-place individuals are hired in transitional jobs. Attired in silkscreened shirts sporting the phrase, "Jobs Not Jails," they find a safe, supportive environment in which to learn both concrete and relational job skills while simultaneously building their work experience. As former rivals work together, they experience true friendship and community in place of the limited cohesion of gang life.

Job and work-readiness trainees are also required to attend some kind of class each day. If they're tardy three times, they have to talk to Verdugo, who is now associate

executive director.

"We find out what's going on," he says. "We tell them, 'We love having you here, but you have to want to be here. A lot of people need this place, but your tardies are saying you don't really want this place.'" Most of the time, they start coming to work on time. Often Verdugo talks to their case manager to figure out if they need counseling, a drug program, or legal help. Says Verdugo: "They'll give up on us before we ever give up on them. I can't give up. We have to find a way."

Verdugo has learned to do what Father G does: to pick up on people's patterns. He watches a person's gaze. Is his chin up? "If not," says Verdugo, "I go to him and give him some extra love. If I see that he's on drugs, we test him. He may need to go to rehab or an outpatient drug program. Even with all the bad experiences of my life, I'm making a

difference in people's lives. The love I get from G, I push it forward to someone else. What an honor it is to be here and to work with these beautiful people. We're all from different barrios and different races, but we're one big family."

When trainees are ready, they work with employment counselors to prepare to transition to jobs outside Homeboy. These counselors search out available jobs and work one-on-one with clients to develop resumés, hone interview skills, and find good employment matches. They go out into the community and build relationships with local businesses, searching out employers who are willing to work with parolees or former gang members, taking the time to overcome their fears and reservations.

As Verdugo explains, "We're putting them back on the track of life, love, health, prosperity, helping them find jobs with friends of Homeboy that say, 'I want to take a homeboy to hire. I want to take a chance.' But you're not just taking a chance, you're also changing a life, and not just one life but also his kids'. My grandfather was a gang member, my father was a gang member, I was. What about my kids if I don't step out of this? I gotta change me, then my kids change. The ripple effects are incredible."

The emphasis on work is strategic—*Jobs for a Future* and now Homeboy *Industries*. One of the organization's mottos is "Nothing Stops a Bullet Like a Job." A job enables former gang members to have self-respect, to learn the value of accomplishment, and to receive affirmation for it as well as to pay for a place to live and provide for a wife and children, which many have.

"Work is ennobling," says Boyle, "and there's no such thing as a job that doesn't bring dignity. Yet jobs only do 85 percent of what needs to get done. The classes, the therapy, and so on move them toward wholeness." With the help of a case manager, each homie chooses from 30 education classes: 12-step meetings; charter high school classes; and classes in job-readiness, parenting, anger management, relationship building, grief and loss, computer job skills, creative writing, and music and art enrichment. Mental health counseling and legal services are available as needed. The County of Los Angeles Probation Department recently granted approval to Homeboy's court-mandated domestic violence batterers intervention program, the first to open in eight years.

So Homeboy is not only a

worksite, but also a training program and a therapeutic community. Leaving gang life is a process. Redirecting their lives in a positive direction strengthens not only the individual, but also that person's family, enabling that person to be a leader and role model.

KINSHIP

The goal is to infuse hope in those for whom hope is foreign. It promotes the idea that God is for us, no matter what, replacing the distorted idea that God watches people to pounce on them at the first false move. The latter resembles gang life, in which every mistake is remembered and held against a member forever. Gang members are required to do whatever is asked of them, no matter how cruel; if they don't do it, they're deemed to be "no good."

Disengaging from gang life requires finding a relational replacement, and Boyle believes community is the only thing that is compelling enough to do this.

"We want to illuminate the dark corners of the empty gang life," explains Boyle, "and replace it with community, which is a sense of belonging, feeling that you're a part of something. A community of kinship is real. The gang milieu feels like it's real, but it isn't. It's hollow. I always tell them, 'The difference between your neighborhood and this place is that we have your back. The gang doesn't.'"

Ray Moreno, who has worked at Homeboy for about a year, says that Homeboy helps former gang members realize



Since 1996 Homeboy Silkscreen & Embroidery has employed nearly 500 former gang members, who develop a work ethic alongside their past enemies. They use state-of-the-art techniques to create designs for clothing and promotional items for over 2,000 clients, including schools, church groups, and entertainment businesses.

GANG ANGLES

MORE UNCONVENTIONAL GANG-RELATED OUTREACHES ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Trenton: Incarnating Peace

by Samuel Atchison

Earlie Harrell is an unlikely peacemaker. An acknowledged leader in the Sex, Money, Murder set of the Bloods gang in Trenton, N.J., he has a significant criminal history and is well known among law enforcement officials in the area. Yet when open warfare among the city's gangs led to a number of deaths several years ago, some of the mothers in the community began to look to him to help end the violence.

In response he formed an umbrella organization, Messiah's Hands Inc., to teach life management skills to young gang members. Together with Rev. Julio Guzman, a local pastor, he created the Trenton Peace Movement in an effort to broker peace and provide alternatives to gang violence through training and employment. He also developed his own product—designer candles—and began working with an entrepreneurial consultant to burnish the business skills he originally acquired in the drug trade.

In his unpublished manifesto, "The Bottomline Perspective," Harrell urges "those of us who have been blessed with the vision to see the truth," to go "into the darkness and retrieve God's lost children" from gang violence.

To be sure, not everyone is convinced Harrell is a changed man. For many, the fact that he has remained in the gang is a major sticking point. This has doubtless cost him much-needed support, which in turn has led some of his young followers to return to crime. For Harrell, however, it's a matter of credibility. Being a Blood is part of who he is, but drug dealing and violence, as he tells his charges, are not what it means to be a Blood. Yet, as he noted at a recent church conference in Trenton, "I'm not [just] a gang member. I'm a child of God." And as such, Harrell believes that the only way he can reach other gang members is to remain one himself.

Chicago: Sacred Transformations

by Kristyn Komarnicki

Eric Dean Spruth offers former gang members (and others with pasts they want to leave behind) a chance to turn the tattoos they've outgrown into new symbols of hope. An art therapist who works with inmates in Cook County Jail in Chicago, Ill., he is also a tattooist who believes that transforming old tattoos is a "concrete way of letting go of the past and making commitments to a better future."

"I design custom works with each person," explains Spruth, "discussing what the tattoo will mean to them, in order to create an image that becomes a source of daily inspiration to maintain a life of sobriety, a life that includes a commitment to the welfare of children, to family, to the community, and, for some, to God."

Through his nonprofit Sacred Transformations, Spruth offers his services free of charge to anyone willing to fill out the in-depth application and to work through the consultation and art development process, which takes six to eight months. The client is asked to research ideas and come up with an image or symbol that represents his new life. Volunteer artists submit designs for review, and when everything is finalized the new image is superimposed over the old, with elements from the original design often incorporated into the new one. The lengthy, reflective process is therapeutic and an essential part of the "sacred transformation."

Israel Vargas served more than 12 years in prison for a gang-related murder. Today he is a father and runs a Chicago nonprofit that serves the homeless. "I have to make sure that the message I'm sending out there is a positive one and not a negative one," Vargas told Chicago PBS affiliate WTTW. But the gang tattoo stretched across his back read "Satan Disciples," so he visited Spruth to see about bringing his physical appearance into line with his spiritual reality. He settled on the image of a gargoyle, a sculpture that adorns medieval churches to scare off evil spirits. "I've always been battling between good and evil," explains Vargas, "and now evil is behind me, and I'm moving forward."

their glamorous gang days are over. "Nobody really accepts you in the neighborhood," says Moreno, "but here at Homeboy we're not judged. Here people value you for who you are. You find honest friendship and a steady paycheck."

The folks at Homeboy seek to tell each person the truth of unconditional love: They are exactly what God had in mind when God made them. Their life does not matter less because of what they've done and what has been done to them. Hope abounds.

FINDING GOD IN ALL THINGS

But fostering such intentional kinship among homies can be taxing to the spirit and a "a pretty punishing hard reality," says Boyle. Even those who escape the gang life can end up at the wrong end of a gun: To date, Boyle has presided at the burial of 173 of his homies. Taking one day at a time and staying focused on the present helps him keep going, especially since the economic downturn, which has necessitated laying off a sizable percentage of his workers, many of whom have refused to leave, preferring to remain on the job and work for free rather than return to the streets.

"We've been through really tough moments here," says Boyle. "But I don't really entertain discouragement or giving up. I've been doing this a long enough time."

When asked in what ways he encounters Jesus in his work, Boyle responds,



PUTTING KIDS TO WORK

"One of our biggest struggles is lack of funding," says Hector Verdugo, associate executive director at Homeboy Industries (pictured far left, with Father Boyle, at a speaking event). He'd like to see more young people hired at the ministry's various job sites.

"It's like *Titanic*. The boats are leaving and they're half full. We have this building, and it's not full because of lack of funding. You see organizations like Adopt a Pet. Saving a dog is great, but these are people. They aren't the ones that most of society looks at and wants to save. These are not children with cleft palates, for example. No, we're gonna save that guy with tattoos, who probably broke into my car last week. But

we don't save just him; we save his kid, his family, his mom, his kids' kid. We've got to see it in the long-term. If every one saw this, we wouldn't see so much crime on the news."

A former gang member himself, Verdugo is a walking advertisement for what Homeboy can do. To respond to his challenge to put more at-risk young people to work in \$8/hour jobs that will train them with coveted life and employment skills, make a donation at Homeboy-Industries.org.

"Only all the time. If you're attentive, that will be a constant in your life." But he admits to getting "kind of anxious."

"I see all these people out there waiting for me," he explains, nodding toward the folks lining up outside his office to speak with him. "That's what the day is like. They come in and their hair's on fire."

Boyle likes the African proverb "A person becomes a person through other people." In spite of and through all the challenges,

"There can be no doubt that the homies have returned me to myself," writes Boyle in his recent book, tales of two decades of his work with gang members. "I've learned, with their patient guidance, to worship Christ as he lives in them."

Boyle objects to the idea he can do this work because

he's special. "People are always disqualifying themselves. They say, 'I can't do this because I'm not Latino, or I'm not tattooed, or I'm not a felon or a parolee.' Then you lose sight that this is not a specialized, rarified thing but just a relational thing: human beings connecting to human beings."

Homies like Hector Verdugo prove that. "I'm not a holy roller," he says, "but God is with me every step of the day, every second. God whispers in my ear when I need courage to step up when I want to step down. In my mind I know this is not me; this is the spirit of love, which is the spirit of God. I still need more of it in my life. It's great when the conversation opens up, and people ask me questions, and I get to give the respect and glory to God. People walk away getting it. Homeboy is a place that's about action; we just do it. That makes more of a difference than anything else."

Jan Johnson (JanJohnson.org) is a writer, speaker, and spiritual director. She is the author of 18 books, including Enjoying the Presence of God, When the Soul Listens, and Savoring God's Word, all from NavPress. IVP will release her latest, Abundant Simplicity, in June. She lives in Southern California.



Community service plays an important role in the re-education of former gang members.

Find out more about Homeboy Industries at Homeboy-Industries.org, numerous videos on Facebook and YouTube, or Gregory Boyle's book, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (Free Press, 2010). Read an excerpt starting on page 18.