

Living in gangland

PHOTO COURTESY OF LUIS RODRIGUEZ

Former gang member turned educator Luis Rodriguez talks about the globalization of a violent culture

BY JAKE THOMAS
STAFF WRITER

Luis Rodriguez joined an East Los Angeles street gang when he was just 11 years old. After living a tumultuous life that involved numerous arrests, drug use and a stint being homeless, which he documents in his memoir "Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.," he turned away from the violent life, becoming a respected activist and community leader. He also began working as a journalist for various newspapers in California and became the editor of the People's Tribune, a radical newspaper that covered labor issues, homelessness and the arts.

The highly praised author of both poetry and nonfiction is an outspoken critic of more conventional lock-'em-all-up approaches to combating gangs, which Rodriguez says are shortsighted and make the problem worse. Rodriguez says that we are in an age of gang globalization that is being driven by policies in the U.S.

In recent years, Portland has seen an uptick in gang violence, including a rash of shootings. All of which has community leaders and city officials stepping up actions to respond to the public outcry. Rodriguez weighs in on some of the approaches being advocated in response, what drives kids to join gangs, and how far it's gone beyond the kids in the hood.

Jake Thomas: How have gangs changed in the past 20 years. Who is joining them today?

Luis Rodriguez: It used to be more about protection, but now it's more about drugs and money. The vast majority of kids who join gangs — that vast majority — are not violent. Most of them aren't even criminally involved. They join gangs for reasons that have to do with fitting in. They think they'll get respect. Some of them will get in trouble, but they're not really gangsters.

But the hardcore part of the gang — it's hard to say what that is, maybe 10 percent — that hardcore group drives most of the violence. They're the ones that go in and out of the prison system. The prison system trains them to be better at it. Better gangsters, better shot-callers. The prison system is like the school for the advanced gang leaders, so what's happening is because we have such a great proliferation of prisons in this country, you're getting a greater proliferation of hardcore gang members entering communities, schools and neighborhoods where kids would join gangs but not necessarily be hardcore. But with hardcore gang members among them, a lot more tends to happen.

I think that we have too many people in prison, or on probation or parole. In California, we had 15,000 prisoners in 1970 and now we have 165,000 and several thousand that have been shipped off to other states. So it's really a gross number of people who go into the system and are not getting help; they are not getting rehabilitation; they are

very rarely getting education. They're coming out more gangster oriented.

J.T.: In Portland, we've had a resurgence of gang activity and the mayor has asked the U.S. attorney for Oregon to more aggressively prosecute career gang members and give them longer sentences. Do you think that's an appropriate approach for career gang members?

L.R.: That seems to make sense from a media gratification viewpoint. In other words, it's politically expedient and sounds good, but those kids could turn their lives around if we give them the proper assistance and support. Those kids eventually have to get out. I have seen exponentially how the gangs have grown in relation to how they put those so-called career criminals in jail.

In California, for example, and I'm sure Oregon

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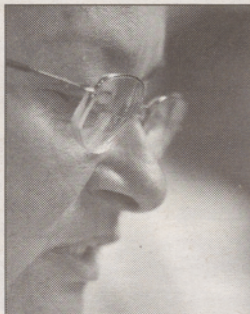
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