

Harry Bradshaw, of the Oregon Youth Authority:

"The most striking thing about these kids, and this is probably why I work with them, is the skills it takes to be someone who has status in a gang. They're so smart. They're great leaders. They're very influential. There is so much talent there, if they could switch that from the negative stuff and into a positive side of life, they could be so successful and a lot of the times, they're the most engaging youth that you can speak with. If we can break them from that, there's still a lot of hope for them."

YOUTHS, from page 7

"In my mind I was like, this is one of the ultimate levels of disrespect that you can give any gang member. He just gave it to me, so you have one choice to make. You're either going to do it or you're not going to do it.

"I thought about getting caught, and I thought about the glamor of getting caught, and I thought about the praise I would get. My goal was to get away with this, but if I did get caught, all right, well, I'm going to be shining for a while.

"I didn't know that he had died.

"My whole thing was, I don't want to hurt anybody that hasn't physically done any harm to me, so when I found that out he was dead, I was like, I just went against everything that I said. At the end, I shot the gun. I know what bullets do - they kill people.

Marsel said it was all about respect, but looking back, he sees it differently.

"I measured myself on a scale that doesn't even matter. None of that matters."

Bradshaw said some policies at schools, such as suspensions and expulsions, indirectly contribute to a youth's decision to become gang involved. "Having a kid who's already behind on his education and is high-risk for gang involvement and then gets expelled from school or suspended," he said, "it really only pushes them further into that direction.

"I had a youth, he had fairly significant gang involvement. He brought a steak knife to school because his family had steak the night before for dinner and he brought the leftovers for lunch and stuck a steak knife in his school lunch. He takes it out at lunch, and next thing you know he's having an expulsion hearing because he brought a weapon to school. We really had to work to get (school officials) to see it from a different perspective. Yes, we understand you have this policy, but this kid's come a long way and is really trying to make it. The worst thing you could do is kick him out of school now."

We asked the youths what interventions in their lives might have put them on a more productive path and what they think the Portland community can do to help prevent at-risk youths from committing violent acts.

LUIS

"A big thing would be the schools, the prison pipeline. A lot of schools are zero tolerance for everything, and I think they need to look into that because usually kids in middle school - that's where they start. It's obviously not going to be 100 percent effective, but if they create a strong program that has people who are in this situation go speak to them, that would really help. Obviously, you have to do more than just listening to someone; you have to do more engagement-type things.

"I just want them to change that Measure 11 (mandatory minimum sentencing law). There are a lot of first-time offenders in here. I know people in here - took a cellphone, got like five to 10 (years). It's not worth six years of your life for taking a cellphone.

"They don't realize it's really affecting a lot of people's lives, and not just them as an individual, but their family. A lot of people got kids, a lot of people are that support system for their family, so losing them just makes things crumble.

"If they don't hurt someone, they don't deserve Measure 11 charges. There's other ways out.

"There has to be something designed to help youth. When I was on house arrest, they made me go to AA groups and stuff like that - just being engaged in positive things. They moved me out of Portland to Beaverton with my great-grandma."

TREI

"I grew up around women and my cousins. If I had to pick a role model, it'd probably be the streets - the older homies.

"Honestly, I didn't meet my first role model until I got locked up. Robert Carson. (Carson is an OYA employee.) I look at him like a father figure. He's a good dude. He

gets me. I don't know how to explain it.

"I don't think it should take this long, for me to get to this point of my life, before I found a male role model.

"If there was like a group in the community that sincerely cared about the younger generations, and they would try harder, at the end of the day that's what it really is - for them to try harder. And that the folks that we do look up to growing up - that they wouldn't take advantage of the young minded. Making us into the folks that we are today."

"If there was like a group of folks that truly cared about the younger generation, they would actually try to reach out, and take these kids up under their wings, because it doesn't start in middle school. By the time they get to middle school, they're already gone. It's really elementary school - fifth grade summer, going into sixth grade; that's where it all really starts. I promise you.

"You gotta get that voice in the community - reach out, go to the school, send out fliers. I promise you, if I'm in fifth grade and I see a flier for community basketball - oh God, I'm there! That's all it really takes."

JOSEFINA

"I wish I was taken out of where I lived, from my family. It wasn't so much my mom or my sister, but it was my brothers. I try not to hate them, but I can't help myself if I hate them. I'm not blaming it on them, because everything that I did was my fault, but they made me a little bit of who I was.

"A big thing is for people to listen, and like try to understand, even if they don't. I remember before I got locked up, like a few months, I had this person who was working with me (a counselor at school). I mean she listened, but she really didn't. She understood because she was in prison before, but she was still pretty much involved with the life. She was one of them that fell off, like they act like they care and they listen, but they really don't.

"My outpatient person, I remember telling her I needed help, the whole time I was in DHS custody, which was like six months. I was still doing drugs, I was still drinking. I needed help, and like at that point - I think it's because they were so done with me, because I kept running.

Christina Puentes, who's been working with Oregon's incarcerated gang-involved youths for 17 years, said many community programs miss the mark by focusing on gang suppression - telling kids they can't wear certain colors or hang out in certain areas.



Puentes

"Being gang affiliated is not against the law. It's the behavior. They lump them all up as the same; they're all evil, they're all bad.

"At the end, when they walk out of here, my hope for them is that they change their behavior when they leave. Me asking them to totally leave that affiliation, though, is almost a setup because that's been a part of who they are for so long.

"Until you really get in there and challenge their mentality and why they think that way, and really start pushing those buttons in a therapeutic way, we're not getting anywhere. It is incredibly hard work. You have to take the time to get to know them."

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"The year of my crime, it happened in November, and I remember in June I had just got off DHS custody, but I started doing meth again. I asked to go to treatment, especially like a locked-down facility where I can't run from. I tried to ask for help but nobody listened. That was a big thing for me, because I feel like if I would have went to treatment, then none of this would have happened, and I know that because I would

have never met my co-defendants."

MARSEL

"I just wanted to get my message started now: If you do have some type of problem with school or whatever, just seek out help. There are different programs that can help you with school. Stay in sports if you are in any sports or any other activities.

"I think it's really beneficial when there's somebody close that has. I heard a lot of people say, 'Oh I've done this, oh I know how you're feeling,' but it's like, you had bad grades in high school and now you're a millionaire. But somebody that actually messed up, and that's all they do is help others, they're not getting anything from it because the other ones, they're like getting paid all this money to be like a motivational speaker.

"People who actually did it, and they just want to help, that's really what I think is beneficial, and that is something that I would like to do.

"I plan to volunteer at SEI, Self Enhancement Incorporated, that's where I basically was at my whole middle school years, and I want to go to Texas. My auntie owns a nonprofit organization, the Amadi Guess Foundation. She wants me to talk and tell my story.

He said he wants to tell at-risk youths:

"Everybody has choices, and every choice will lead you down a certain path. It's very important to really think about what you're doing. On my side, I really did think about that whole day. Everything I did was strategic. I signed up for it, so I can't really complain. With that, you need to think about your choices, and think about where they're going to lead you, before you make the decision."

"It amazes me how many times, when I tell them either, 'You're really good at that,' or 'I'm so proud of you that you did this,' they just light up. Because oftentimes, they haven't heard that before," Puentes said. She recalled an older youth she worked with at MacLaren as he neared receiving his high school diploma. He was heavily involved in gangs. She asked him what he thought about going to college as a next step. "Immediately, he put his head down," she said. "Before too long, I noticed he was crying. He said nobody had ever, in his life, told him that college was even a possibility. He ended up going to college. He's still out in the community, and he's making it."

But can Trei walk away from gang life? Before giving his response, he looked across the room to Luis. Luis and Trei were the only youths interviewed together.

Christina Puentes, the gang-related conflict resolution coordinator at Oregon Youth Authority, said for many gang-involved youths,

TAKING TIME OUT

Puentes said the youth who will be transferred to adult prison when they turn 24 are difficult cases. She said knowing they're going upstate gives them reason to hang on to their gang identity longer.

"For Marsel and for Trei - it's kind of like they carry an invisible suitcase with them when they go," she said. "They're going to have to answer for that when they get up there. You might see spurts of negative behavior, and sometimes I think that's because they feel like they have to do something, like an assault or a fight, because they are going to answer for it when they get up there."

"I just want to walk on a sidewalk and go get some McDonald's. From there on, a couple years down the road, if I have a college degree - I want to do everything. I don't have my heart set on a certain type of career. Everything is interesting to me. Wherever I end up, in any type of job, that's just fine with me."

Josefina has 10 1/2 years left on her sentence.

MARSEL

"The reality set in when I was here. And then I started missing out on certain things, like playing basketball - guys my age playing high school basketball - a dream that I had. Playing for Jefferson High School, winning state titles.

At 6-foot-3, Marsel looks like he'd easily dominate a high-school basketball court.

"Then my girlfriend going to prom - I couldn't go to prom with her. And then my graduation came up. My grade-point average was terrible, so I didn't have credits to graduate that year, but I was in here while my friends were graduating, and then my girlfriend graduated, and now my girlfriend goes to college and I'm still in here.

"Right now I'm just hanging out. I plan to get back into school this term. I got my barber's license. I got my high school diploma. I'm mentoring a little bit."

Marsel has his own room in the mental health unit, where he mentors younger inmates. It's an option available to youths who have earned their way up OYA's "tag system," in which a youth's privileges are based on the length of time they've behaved. Marsel said he especially likes to mentor gang-affiliated youths.

"Regardless if you're a Crip, you're a Blood, you're from Hoover, I don't care where you're from, but if you're a gang member, for some reason, I'm drawn to that, you know, just to talk about the positives and negatives of both sides. And there's not really too many positives about gangs. A lot of it is just about sports because a lot of gang members, for some reason, play sports, at some point, and have love for sports. But they don't like school, and for some reason get close to graduating (and get off track). And it's like, all right, 'You can graduate. I can't go home and play basketball, and football, but you can.'

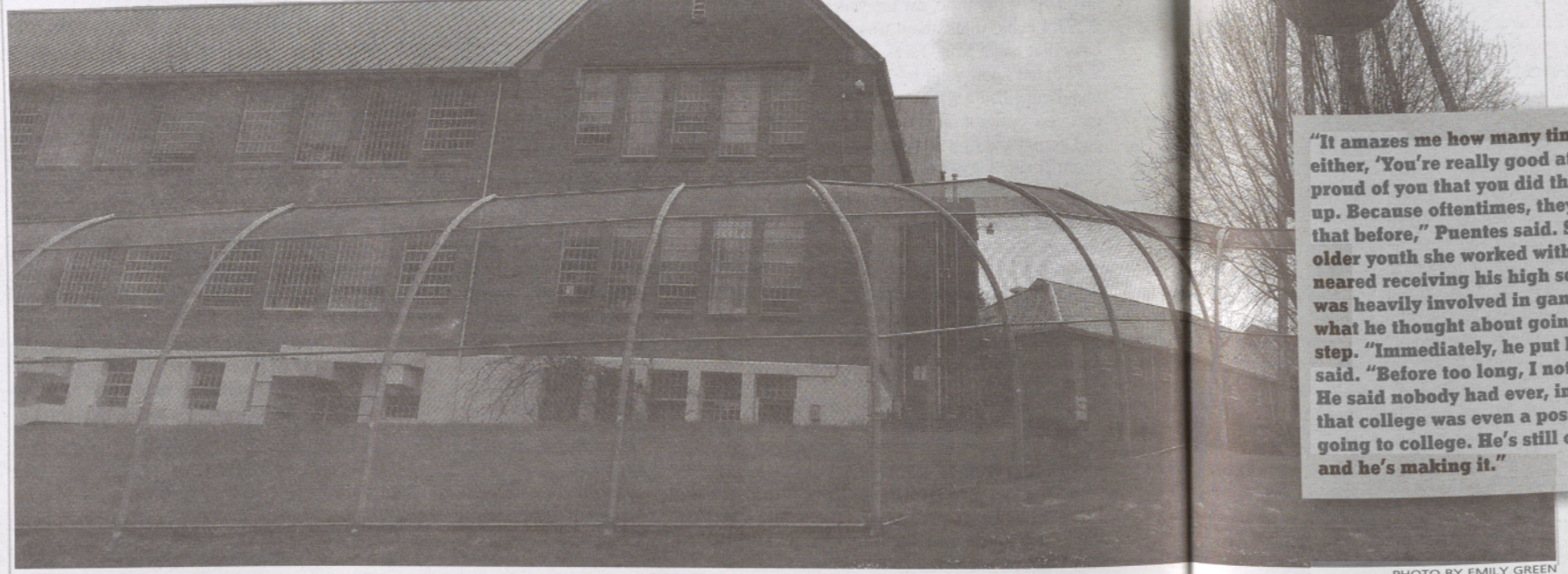
"To be honest with you, I had my turning point, and then I had another turning point going the opposite way. And now I'm kinda turning back. My first turning point, it was like, I got it. I know what I want to do with my life."

Marsel said he plans to open his own barbershop when he gets out - anywhere but Portland, maybe in Eugene or Corvallis.

"But then time starts going by, and it's like, well I'm still here because of the choices that I made. I'm gonna keep going back and forth. Might as well go back now. And then I was like, 'Hold on! I don't want this for myself. Now I'm coming back around.'"

Marsel has three years left in OYA custody, then he'll be transferred to adult prison, where he'll serve the remaining eight years of his sentence.

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Marsel is serving a 19-year sentence for a murder he committed at 16. He is housed at Hillcrest Youth Correctional Facility in Salem, pictured here. In two years he'll be transferred to an adult prison.

PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN