

A gang leader grows up

Marin Independent Journal, Sunday, January 9, 1994

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LOVE — and the desire to act like an adult — made Jorge Sanchez change his life.

In Los Angeles he had run with the Crips, one of the city's most notorious gangs. His reputation followed him when he moved to San Rafael. Without his willing it, he became leader of a gang at San Rafael High School.

"I spent all my time fighting," he says, "or walking around with a beer in one hand and a cigarette in another. I wasn't doing anything good. It was like living in hell."

His friends attacked him as a sell-out a year and a half ago when he decided to quit the gang and find a better life. "They said I was a traitor."

Sanchez, 20, of San Rafael, joined the Marin Conservation Corps last February. He's a leader again, this time of young people trying to find a responsible place in the world. He has a clear personal agenda: a high school diploma, a family of his own.

Meanwhile, he and fellow corps members work all over Marin building retaining walls, clearing creeks, constructing hiking trails.

Says Sanchez: "I am building things that will last."

His story begins in Zacatecas, Mexico. His father was already commuting from home to the United States where he earned money to support his wife and three sons.

When Sanchez was 14, he decided to follow his dad here. "I had lots of friends, but some of them had moved to L.A. I wanted to be where they were."

He saved money from the monthly clothing allowance his dad sent; within three months he and a friend had enough to get to Tijuana, where he called an older brother in San Bernardino. The brother advised him to stay in Mexico ("Dad will have a heart attack when he finds out"), but Sanchez refused. "From Tijuana I could see San Diego. It looked very pretty. I didn't want to go back."

His brother, a legal immigrant, brought him across the border.

Living in North Hollywood was not easy for a 14-year-old: The city seemed overwhelming. The friends he had hoped to join had moved to Texas. He got a job as a bus boy and fell in with some cousins who "liked to go to clubs."

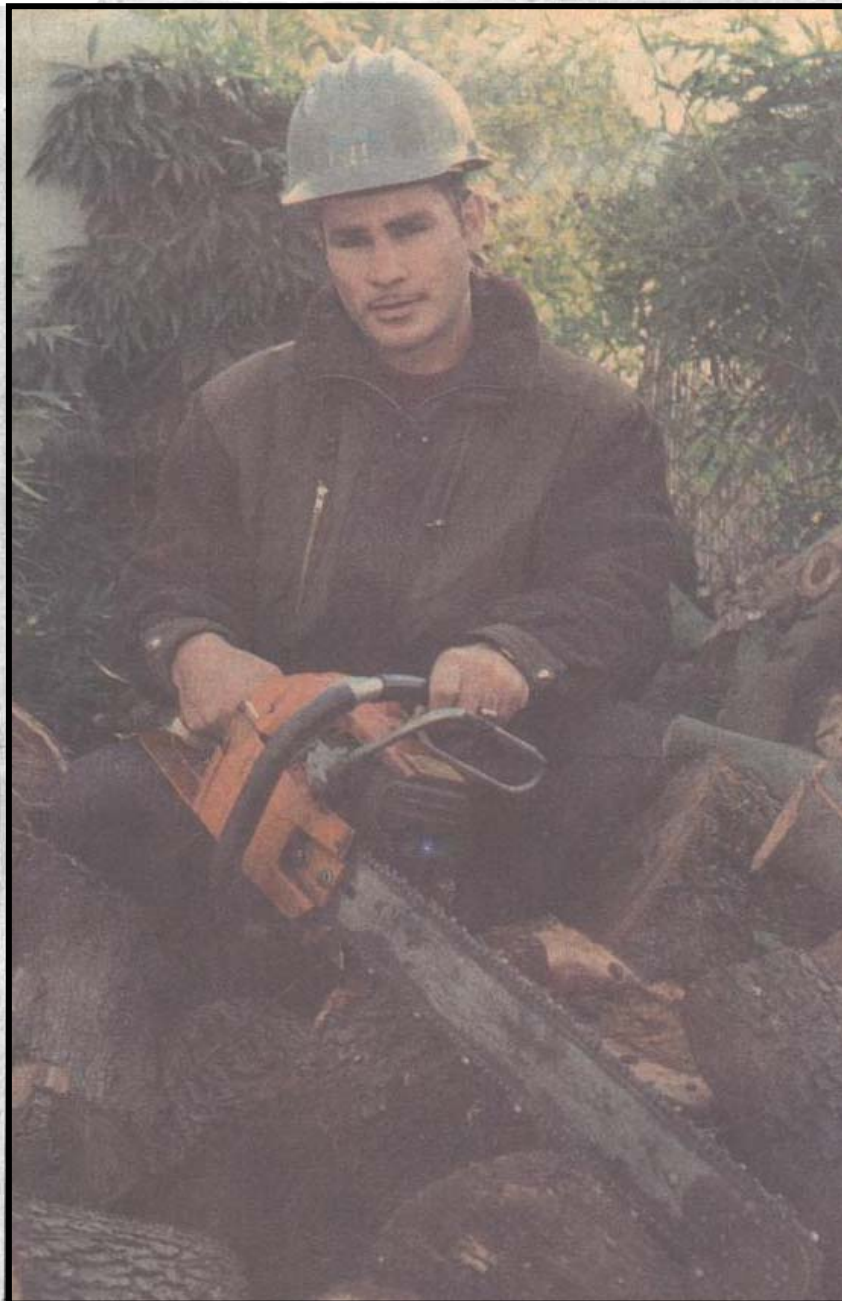
"I wanted to go with them, but they said my clothes were not good enough. They said, 'We're going to dress you cool.' They took me shopping for new clothes and they brushed my hair. It was good. I fit right in and didn't feel uncomfortable at all."

Club life became all-important. He began showing up late or goofing off on the job, and was fired. (He didn't tell his dad, "he thought I was doing good.") After that he spent most of his time with cousins and their friends who belonged to gangs. "I was young, I enjoyed being with them."

His dad moved to Marin. On his own, Sanchez bounced back and forth between Los Angeles and his brother's home in San Bernardino: "My brother didn't like my friends, and I didn't like San Bernardino because there was nothing to do there."

In Los Angeles, he and his pals lived near a police station: "All day long you saw policemen herding gang members up the street with their hands on their heads."

His mother stopped at San Bernardino



Jeff Vendsel photo

LEADER OF THE CORPS: Jorge Sanchez, 20, of San Rafael, now works for the Marin Conservation Corps while studying for his high school diploma

en route to visiting his father in Marin; she was under orders to bring Sanchez with her. "I went, but oh," he groans in anguish at the idea of moving here. "It was bad enough to be in San Bernardino. But I couldn't say no to my father. I never have."

He was struck by the beauty of Marin, but "I didn't feel comfortable." After working a few months at the lumber company where his dad was employed, Sanchez entered San Rafael High.

"All the clothes I brought with me from L.A. were really baggy and big, and all the kids thought I was a big gangster. I guess I let them think like that. I started acting like a gang member. At the time I guess I felt like it."

His blue shirts (Crips colors) and his gangster aura got him in trouble: "I had a

lot of fights. People had fear of me because I was from L.A."

The way he tells it, people picked fights with him for little reason. But once challenged, he was ready.

"It got so I wasn't myself any more, I was too hyper. I felt like I always had to fight, to be looking at my back."

And then he met Lisa, a fellow high school student: "I liked her very much and she liked me." At one point he tried to break from his Marin lifestyle by going to Los Angeles and taking Lisa with him. She was miserably homesick without her family. "It was hard coming back, but we did."

Lisa went to live with a grandmother in Oakland; he lived with a friend. That didn't work either.

and the love I have for my wife, that's what made the change."

He likes his work at the corps, and has helped defuse problems among other members. "I don't exactly feel like a leader," he says, "but I get a lot of respect. I give a lot of respect back. I talk to people the way I expect them to talk back to me."

Corps director Marilee Eckert calls him "a good leader for the corps men. If he sees a problem he jumps in and tries to help. Other corps members look up to him."

He has a message for other young people: "We have a whole world in front of us, we have ourselves and others to love, and a whole lot of beauty around us. If we stop to think about those things some times, I think we wouldn't be so hateful."

The Man and The Macho

Macho is the one who abuses mentally, physically and spiritually the people around him.

Man is the one who understands and respects people around him.

Macho is the one who resolves his frustration with alcohol, drugs and violence.

Man is the one who resolves his frustrations, searching for positive answers and uses his intelligence.

Macho is the one who doesn't recognize his own mistakes or his needs.

Man is the one who recognizes his own mistakes and knows what he wants.

Macho is the one who lies and lies until he starts to believe his own lies.

Man is the one who understands himself and can rise above difficulties.

Macho is the one who always ends up doing the same thing he did yesterday.

Man is the one who always tries to experience something new.

*Rebellion
Irresponsibility
Ignorance
makes the Macho.*

*Experience
Responsibility
Wisdom
makes the Man.*

— Jorge Sanchez wrote this poem after joining the Marin Conservation Corps.

Sanchez

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leaving her at home. "She would cook a delicious dinner for me and I wouldn't be there. That was bad — dinners are one of the most special moments a couple has."

At last, his conscience took over. "I saw what I was doing to my girlfriend. And I wasn't being who I wanted to be. I decided I didn't want to deal with my friends any more, I wanted to deal with myself."

He announced he was breaking with the gang; the gang felt betrayed. By now he and Lisa were living with his brother, and former pals "kept knocking on the door. By working overtime as a security guard, and by promising a landlord to move-in-now, pay-the-security-

deposit-later, he found a new home. He and Lisa spent their first Christmas together. "We didn't tell anybody where we lived. We started our relationship all over."

By February he had found the job at the Marin Conservation Corps, which has a built-in study program to help him get his high school diploma. The corps has also provided a "different" ethos: "In my first interview, they told me, 'You throw the first punch and you're fired.'"

He works and studies 40 hours a week with the corps, weekends as a security guard. Lisa works in San Rafael as a gift-wraper.

On July 24, "the biggest day of our lives," Lisa and he got married, limousine and all, in Reno. They will have their first child in September.

"I see myself growing up, becoming an adult," Sanchez says. "That,