



From Gangs to Guru

One leader changes lives

By Lindsay Downey, associate editor

Gil Gonzales was headed down a dark path. Living on the streets in Fresno, Calif., he watched friends and family members die or go to jail because of gang violence and drugs. As a homeless high school dropout, there seemed to be little light at the end of his tunnel—until one day he decided to steer himself in another direction. Now, Gonzales is proving there's no obstacle that can't be overcome through hard work and perseverance. Currently headed for law school, he's nudging his younger brothers in the right direction and working as a mentor to inspire at-risk youth across the nation.

Gonzales grew up with absentee parents who were unable to care for him or his brothers, Gabriel and Gavin. "My mom was removed from our home when we were little kids," Gonzales says. "She was in a motorcycle accident and was in a coma for two years. My dad's been in jail throughout my childhood." Gabriel and Gavin grew up living with different relatives, while Gonzales found himself homeless. He witnessed violence and drug deals on a daily basis and says about half the people he knew carried guns. "I've lost two cousins to drugs and gang violence," Gonzales says. "I was either going to become a statistic, or I was going to move away and start a new life."

With nothing but a 1984 Datsun to his name, 19-year-old Gonzales borrowed gas money and moved to San Diego to start his new life. "I needed to turn my life around and go to school," he says. "I wanted to be someone respectable, not so much for myself, but to provide my brothers with some sort of role model—hopefully, that one influence that would break the cycle of my family." When he got to San Diego, Gonzales re-enrolled in school, all the while determined to inspire and mentor Gabriel

and Gavin. "They've told me that I'm basically the closest thing they've had to a parent," Gonzales says. "I had this responsibility to them to be a good role model and to show them that life doesn't have to be about living in alcoholism and drugs and gang violence and fearing for your life."

Gonzales worked his way through **San Diego Community College** and then **Pitzer College** in California, where he graduated with a 3.7 GPA and a degree in political and media studies. While at Pitzer, he continued to motivate others, creating a program to help other young people on destructive paths. He participated in a program that taught incarcerated youth, but he was disappointed with the outcome. "I noticed a lot of the kids up there are very withdrawn," he says. "They have this macho image that they want to uphold, so learning isn't really cool in the gang culture. We were teaching them how to read, but it didn't seem as if it was really working, so I wanted to approach it differently."

As a result, Gonzales launched Borrowed Voices, a program that gave incarcerated youth the opportunity to write about their lives and tell their stories to the community. Through the program, spoken-word artists performed at the jails to foster creative thinking, and Borrowed Voices volunteers taught poetry classes. "The dynamics of the classroom changed," Gonzales says. "There wasn't a tension in the room anymore, and students wanted to talk, wanted to share stories about their upbringing." When they didn't feel like they were being forced to learn, the young people became more interested in the program. "It wasn't so much us teaching and telling them what to learn but letting them know that we want to hear what they have to say, and we're willing to learn from them," Gonzales says. "Through that, they wanted to read more after they got done telling their stories."

The students' written accounts touched

the community. "The stories that these kids were telling were just gripping," Gonzales says. "People got involved and really wanted to help these kids." Gonzales helped raise \$3,000 to organize a Borrowed Voices performance that showcased the work created in the program. More than 200 people from the community attended. "It was just an amazing experience," Gonzales says.

Because the artists were in prison, they couldn't attend the event to read their own work. So, volunteers read their poetry and stories in their places. "Pitzer College students worked with the boys very closely to see what poems they wanted them to read and how best to read them," Gonzales says. Afterward, he brought a videotape of the evening's performance to the prison for the writers to see. "They were just ecstatic," he says. "They were so excited to see that these random people from the community were clapping because of something they'd written."

With Gonzales' leadership, some of the at-risk youth now have higher aspirations of their own and want to forgo the gangs and drugs in favor of education, the way Gonzales and his brothers have. "It turned into something bigger and more successful than I ever could have fathomed," he says. "Now you hear about the kids wanting to go to college and the Marines, whereas before, they talked about just going back to the block."

Gonzales is in the midst of applying to law school. Among his top choices: **Harvard University** in Massachusetts, **Stanford University** in California, the **University of Southern California**, the **University of California—Los Angeles**, and **Cornell University** in New York. "I want to prove that anyone can go from the complete bottom to one of the best law schools in the nation," he says. "It'll prove that with hope, anything can happen."

Gonzales is currently working for the California Senate Fellowship and will continue to speak about his life, hoping to spark change in the lives of others. "Student leaders need to reach out to those who don't see what we see," Gonzales says. "When at-risk youth hear stories like mine, they have hope. They start asking about things like financial aid and junior college." 📖

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