

Alberto has three little brothers – their ages are 1, 8 and 13. Alberto talks to the 13 year old a lot about gang life, since that's right around how old Alberto himself was when he got caught up with a gang. He says it was easy to just kind of "fall into it" since most of the kids in his neighborhood were in one gang or another.

After a few years Alberto says he just got sick of seeing his friends arrested or worse yet killed. So he backed off. "I mean it's a past lifestyle for me, but I still hang out with them once in a while at a party, not doing anything crazy, I mean just hang out, we talk memories, old friends, new friends," says Alberto. "Once in a while they'll call me up if they want to hang at a party and go out and eat, but that's the farthest I'll go, I won't go out any late night cruising like we used to."

Alberto never went so far as to get initiated into the gang, so getting out when he was 15 was easier than it could have been. But he felt really alone once he was out. It was "almost like a drug, an addiction, like a lifestyle," he says. "Once you're in there you know nothing more, you know nothing less. I didn't know why my mom didn't want to let me go out when my friends were there. It was like, oh they're my friends, but she saw it as oh they're all the gang members, they're taking my child away. But as the years passed and the more my mother cried, I kind of realized what I was doing."

#### **Thanks for the advice, Mom**

Alberto, who's now 17, says he mostly got out because of his brothers – he wanted to set a good example. But he has his Mom to thank, too. She would ask him the same question over and over: "If you keep living the lifestyle...how do you see yourself in 20 years?"

He asked his friends in the gang where they saw themselves in 20 years, and the three most common answers were: "six feet under the floor dead, or in the hospital or in jail for life." It was rare, says Alberto, for anyone to say "I'm a grow up 40 years old with a family, live in a suburban area in middle class. They didn't see the future or the past, they just lived day by day."

Alberto graduates high school this spring, and in June he's off to boot camp. He signed a four-year contract with the U.S. Marine Corps, that's why he asked us not to use his last name. He's afraid it could jeopardize his military career.

#### **On why he plans to return to southwest Detroit**

I ask him where he wants to live when he's done with military life, where he wants to settle down. He says he's thought about moving out of Detroit, starting a new life in a new city, but he doesn't want to turn his back on his hometown. "Why let the children after me suffer the same thing? Why not come back and help out the community? Like the saying goes, you want to have better for your children, and I see myself one day if I do have children, I don't want them to live this. I want them to live a better life."

In an ideal world, that life would include a lot less poverty and a lot more opportunity. But that's a tall order for one person. So Alberto says he'll probably start by helping kids in the neighborhood find better things to do with their time than join a gang.