
I officially joined the gang when I was 11 years old. I got “jumped in,” which means beat up by the other gang members. First, three girls surrounded me and hit me hard over and over. Then, all the girls in the gang made a circle around me and hit me and kicked me more. Then, the guys came and about 20 guys lined up on one side and about 20 girls lined up on the other side, leaving a path down the middle. I had to walk through that path, as they punched and kicked me. And I had to be standing by the time I got to the end.

When I started down the path, my arm was already broken. It hurt so much. As I walked, they kept punching me in the ribs. Every time I fell down they’d kick me. I thought I was going to pass out. Toward the end of the path, I fell and they stepped on my leg and broke it. Somehow, I managed to pull myself up and limp to the end of the line.

That was my initiation. It was what I had to do to prove that I would do anything for them, even if that including dying.

A lot of people say that people join gangs because they want to fit in, but to me it was more of a survival tool. In my neighborhood, you have to be from somewhere to be able to back yourself up. There were rival Asian and African-American gangs after our territory.

Before I turned 12, I’d been arrested for carjacking, violating curfew, and drug possession. Each time I was let go on probation. But when I was 13, I was arrested for possession of weapons. I got sent to boot camp for eight months.

Boot camp was the worst experience of my life. We had to get up at 5 a.m. and take cold showers and the rooms were always cold. The guards would stand right in front of me and scream stuff like, “You may be something on the street, but you’re nothing in here.”

For months, I had a bad attitude. I got into fights with other girls and talked back to the guards. They wouldn’t let me see my mom until I improved my behavior. In the eight months I was there, she could only visit me four times.

When I got out on probation, I knew I never wanted to go back there. I had to attend school regularly, otherwise I’d be violating my probation and get sent back.

I hated school. I’d started “ditching” in the third grade. By junior high, I almost never went to school. I planned to drop out as soon as I got off probation. To me, my life was kickin’ it with my friends.

My ninth grade English teacher, Ms. Gruwell, changed all that. She took an interest in me, asking where I’d been if I missed class and telling me I could be the first one in my family to finish high