

A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

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& Rose Maes

This narrative is a collaboration between two individuals. The first is a social work professor with 17 years' experience working with and/or teaching about troubled, violent teenagers. The other, Rose Maes, is a 27-year-old ex-gang member who has been involved in violence and drugs since she was eight, and is currently struggling to learn to live in "our" structured, ordered world, rather than the chaotic, violent world of gangs. This story focuses on the first time Rose was a guest speaker in an "Assessment and Interventions with Adolescents" class, where she challenged the students and the professor to examine those two worlds. Through her presentation, Rose discovered that she has a voice, she belongs, and she makes a difference. In listening, the professor again became a student and re-learned a fundamental lesson.

A colleague suggested I write a narrative reflecting my work with youth in gangs. That's a very challenging task. You see, reflective writing simply isn't my style. Research. That's how I was taught to write. Outline an abstract, write the literature review and a methodology section, summarize the results and implications, and then write a conclusion. Very procedure oriented—straightforward, organized; often quite dry. The problem is that common themes and experiences of gang membership—loyalty, respect, family, or power—are anything but dry, and never, absolutely never, straightforward, clear cut, or organized.

I started working with violent adolescents in an in-patient psychiatric hospital in 1982 and with gang members about five years later. The violence, or threat of violence, was always there, whether it be turned inward toward suicidal tendencies or outward in a murderous rage. During those years, I worked in an in-patient psychiatric hospital, ran after-care groups, and conducted family therapy. A university professor since 1992, I've designed training seminars and workshops on intervening with troubled youth, presented at numerous national conferences, and have been employed in the community. I've consulted and am currently a volunteer and member of the Denver Metro Gang Coalition. My work, research, and writing has always focused on troubled youth in some way (see Molidor, Tolman, & Koeber, 2000; Molidor & Potter, 1999; Molidor, 1997a; Molidor, 1997b; Molidor & Watkins, 1996). Seventeen years. It seems I

got started a long time ago and only yesterday, both at the same time.

My struggle with this narrative then is in communicating in one single article the long journey of working with violent, troubled teenagers toward understanding their lives.



The solution, I've decided, is to allow you to listen to a dialogue. I'd like to introduce you, the reader, to a young woman who has been involved with gangs for almost as many years as I've been involved with youth. I'd like to share a lesson I learned from her as she spoke to my "Assessment and Interventions with Adolescents" class.

Rose is a 27-year-old Chicana. Since early childhood, she has been involved in gangs, drugs, alcohol, criminal delinquency, violence, and probably many elements of gang life that I've left out. She now volunteers for the Gang Rescue and Support Project (GRASP). GRASP is one of several programs that works specifically and directly with gang-involved youth in the Denver Metro area. Volunteers of GRASP, like Rose, do presentations in exchange for contribu-

tions to the organization. The money raised from these presentations goes into a fund that provides assistance to the families of those who lose their lives due to gang violence, and is used for burials and/or headstones.

Rose has long straight black hair, wears no make-up, and only goes out in baggy clothes (she says to make her look bigger and therefore less of a victim). She leaves the tattoos on her ankles uncovered for all to see.

A Rosey Presentation

I have to tell you up front that the first time I met Rose, I became totally and completely angry at her. A colleague had recommended her to speak to one of my classes focusing on work with gang-involved youth. This class happened to be made up of primarily young, White, social work students. Early in her presentation, Rose began telling the students that they probably wouldn't be able to understand her because they were White. She went on to say that she hated two things: White [people] and Red [the color of a rival gang]. She also said that wealthy college students couldn't really work with teenagers involved with gangs. You probably get the tone. The next hour and a half was filled with the common theme of how Whites could never understand youth of color involved with gangs. All the while, I was watching the faces of angry, shocked, and insulted graduate students. During the class I didn't give my own feelings much consideration. I didn't let her words in. When the class was over, the students just sat there. Questions? None? How could that be? Overall, the reaction, I think, was intimidation. Rose is small but powerful. I got up and beseeched the students to voice their questions and/or concerns, to take a chance and use this opportunity to explore the world Rose had lived in for so long. The students began slowly, tentatively—a small ripple. Rose's answers were frank, candid, and brutally honest. Soon, the students' questions and comments came much more quickly, like a dam had broken open.

It ended up being one of the best classes in which I've ever been involved. Still, as

the hours passed after class, I found myself thinking more and more about the things Rose said. I got into an argument with her in my head. You must know that feeling. Someone, somewhere, says something insulting to you and you remain silent, or you kind of laugh it off, or even make some weak attempt at a comeback. Later though, you think of several sharp comebacks, that you desperately wish you had said at the time to set the person straight. If only you could go back and tell him or her. You can't, of course. But the thoughts stay there wrestling with you just the same.

What infuriated me the most was that I absolutely could not put my finger on what was making me so angry. Being accused of not being able to understand because of my color? Please. Work with gang kids for a year and count up how often *that's* thrown at you. The truth was I couldn't figure out anything specific that she said that made me angry. It was just there. I didn't know what it was, but the feeling left a terrible, bitter taste.

Of course, I finally figured out my response to her presentation. It came, as it usually does, at around three in the morning. I wish that I could tell you that it was a brilliant insight that will help us all change the world. It wasn't. It was actually quite simple, but a needed reminder. What was it? I'll tell you later. First read what Rose has to



say. To assist the reader in following the flow of the conversation between Rose, myself, and the students, I've put Rose's dialogue in italics.

Twenty-seven now, Rose articulates a complex, and at times contradicting, narrative of the ugliness, the power, and the strength of gang life, a description better than that of any academic, no matter how many years of practice experience. She sits on the table up front swinging her legs as she talks. She doesn't smile much. Included in her words, which I've taken from a transcript of the audio-taped presentation, are some of my own interpretations of what is being said.

Bullet Proof Rose

That's what she called herself in the presentation: bullet-proof Rose. As her words demonstrate, the name fits, but it doesn't.

Rose: I can't represent every female in gangs. I can't represent my age group. I can't represent anybody or do anything but tell you my story and try to pick apart the things that happened to me. I can tell you that if you think the issue is just gangs, you're mistaken. There's a collection of things that drive kids into gangs. It differs for every individual, but I guess that in some ways you could say I was the stereotypical gang girl in that I came from what you edumacated [sic] people call a dysfunctional family. Ya'll will probably like that. The more education people get, the more they seem to stereotype others.

Christian: After Rose makes this statement about educated people she pauses. The pause is a direct challenge to the students, to me. "Am I wrong?" she seems to be asking. She looks over the crowd of students, straight at me. She dares me to disagree with her. I don't.

Rose: For me, I started drinking and drugging when I was nine. By the time I was 12, I was totally into drugs and alcohol. By that time I developed a wall already, don't let nobody in. Then my dad's brother died, and he fell off. He became a complete alcoholic.

My mom was just down depressed. Finally, me and my dad got into a fight and I beat his ass, and from that point forward I was the ruler of the house. At least in the sense of economics and stuff like that. I didn't have a job, but I told my mom how to pay the bills. I raised my sister. I did all these things. I was going on 12.

Christian: Rose doesn't appear sad as she talks about this, but it certainly saddens her audience. I'm listening to her and I'm wondering how this is possible. Taking on the parental role and lost in alcohol and drugs at 12 years old. The wrongness of it is so deep, so complete, so sad.

Walls

Rose: I developed a whole don't talk, don't trust, don't feel kind of scenario, which I'm amazed at how true that is. I always thought that educated people don't know what the hell they're talking about, especially, you know, if you don't live it, you just study it. But it was true for me. That's how I was: don't talk, don't trust, don't feel. That's how all gangsters are. Hell, that's how it is with most of you people too, but especially in the gang-banging world.

Christian: Reflecting later on the above statement, I know exactly what she's talking about. In the classroom we teach about "boundaries." You might recognize the concept in the common reference to someone being in someone else's "space." Same thing. The only difference between boundaries and Rose's walls is the flexibility, the ability or willingness to let emotions flow in and out. Rose's walls allow minimal to zero flexibility. No emotions in or out. She was not going to let anyone cross her boundaries and get in her space.

Rose: There is no such thing as emotions for us. Everyone has a kind of self that we present to other people so that they don't know what's going on underneath us. For me, I was either content or I was angry. Always hating White and Red. Hating and not trusting. Those are the two things that you feel in the gang. The whole time you're

doing anything, you're either content or you're angry. Those are the only two things that happen for you. There aren't all those variety of pretty feelings and you can choose the little faces of that day [this is a reference to an assessment tool used with children to allow them to identify, from a variety of

rituals and all the things that come along with being beat in, or sexed in, or pulling a train [having sex with multiple members], or whatever. For me, I was doing the dirt. I was making my money. I was selling my dope. I was fighting. I was representing. I was doing everything they was doing, and that's how I got my respect. And the gang was my transport or vehicle for my drug and alcohol abuse.

Christian: This was an important point that I missed in class and only caught later while listening to the tape. Rose says the gang was her transport, her vehicle. The majority of gang literature argues that the gang is a replacement for the family. Rose confirms that idea later. But here she speaks of being in a gang in a very different light. Here, the gang is a means of getting pain dulled, getting a fix. It's not *all* about being part of a family. It's more complex than that. It's deeper than that. Membership in a gang is a vehicle for many driving forces, specifically the anger, hate, and violence that has its origin in growing up in a racist, sexist, homophobic, and oppressive society.

Loyalty

Rose: *This whole time I was still very detached, but the most perplexing thing, I guess, for people to understand, is why somebody would choose to be in this lifestyle, what pushes them there, what gets them to be that way. It depends. I think that I would say specifically that females are very much relationship based. I got involved in it because of my boyfriend, and that's still the major of pull for a lot of girls. Females are more relationship based. The guys go more after the machismo stuff; they go after the pride, the respect, the power. For me it was relationship—very connected. I learned about being in a family. I learned everything I didn't learn as a child. I learned the same things that everybody in the world professes to want. I learned respect. I learned trust. I learned loyalty. I learned honesty. The loyalty that you get from banging is tremendous. It's synonymous with love and the connection is overwhelming.*



facial expressions, how they are feeling]. *It doesn't exist. It's two things: content or mad.*

Christian: As Rose spoke, you could feel her wall. Her entire countenance demonstrated the wall she had raised. You could sense the barricade. Fortified. You could just feel her defying you to try to get through it. The wall she speaks of isn't just some academic image, some hypothetical illustration. The wall is real—it's physical, and it's secure.

Moving In

Rose: *What ended up happening is I moved in with my boyfriend, and that was my beginning, my emergence in the gang life. During that time, because it was still so new and there weren't so many members; it wasn't so organized. There weren't the*

Christian: I ask Rose about love. Where does love play a part in the gang?

Rose: *Love? I never heard nobody, including my baby's dad, say that he loves me. They said "I would die for you," and that meant everything to me. That was what I said to my little sister. I said "I would die for you." I would give you the only thing that I was given on the day I was born. My life, my breath. I took in a breath and that made me exist. I would give that to you. That's all that I have to give to you cause I have nothing. I have nothing. That's what I got from being with the gang.*

On the other hand, if you ask gangsters about their siblings, they're usually very adamant about them not getting involved in the lifestyle that they've chosen, which is very strange, I guess. But it makes sense. You love it. You're connected to it. This is who you are, but yet when you're looking at it through somebody else, you know that you can see the negativity. You can't see it through your own eyes, but you know they're there; the feelings that you don't allow anybody to know, the fear that is there. You don't want your little sister or brother to have that, and the same time you don't ever admit that that is what is going on inside you.

Christian: As I'm listening to this, I feel a deep sense of confusion and frustration. I hear Rose describing the "tremendous" loyalty, trust, honesty, and respect that she gets from the gang, and yet she turns around and tells us that most gang members are "adamant" that their siblings don't get into the gang. I think that the contradiction points to the depth that gang members feel, that they have to defend against who they are and the actions they take as gang members. There is a part of them that knows, that understands, how wrong it is for them to be in gangs, and they don't want their siblings to follow suit.

Passive Suicide; Passive Life

Rose: *The experts, the edumacated [sic] people, talk all the time about how gang members are passive suicidal. They don't want to live. They don't see any life for*

themselves. They have nothing, and we [the educated people] got to save them. Hell, for me that wasn't it. For me banging was passive life. What did I have to live for in your world? What exists in your world for me? There is no reason for me to be in your world. But with the gangs, I have something to believe in. I have something to fight for. I have something to represent. I have somebody that stands behind me and is always there for me.

Christian: Later, as I consider this last statement, I believe it has enormous implications. Two worlds. One world empty, the other chaotic but full. Does it matter that the full world, the gang world, is chaos? I don't think so. The chaos, with all its inherent danger, is preferred to emptiness. I think that there is an important message that she tells us here, but it's hidden in her language. An empty world. What does that mean? For Rose, I believe it is not just that "our" world is empty, but rather her belief that there is *no place for her* in our world. I remember hearing the deep sense of exclusion, her lack of recognition, and her sense of being devalued and oppressed. I hear the anger and I understand where it comes from; but I also hear an appeal. "Tell me what exists in your world for me," she demands/pleads. "Give me something/someone to believe in so that I can be part of it."

I think that here Rose is speaking of a much larger issue than her simply feeling as though she is not part of "our" world. I believe she's speaking of a society that continues to disconnect and push away youth, especially youth of color. It's not Rose that doesn't want to feel connected to our society, it's that our society sends a clear message that these youth aren't valued or wanted.

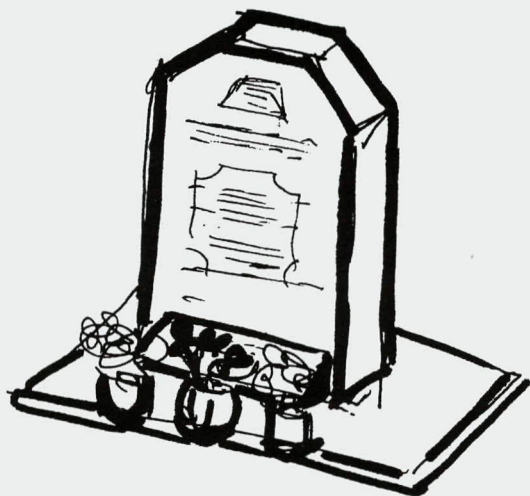
Rose: *So, all the things that people perceive as being passive suicidal, I perceive as passive life, because without my gang life, I had nothing. Without that, I was nobody. Everything in gang life is chaotic. I've been living in chaos since I was eight years old. I know how to run in chaos; I know how to live in it; I know the power of it. I'm so secure*

being a lunatic because that's how I know how to be. I know how to survive in that. I know what that looks like. I know my responsibility. I know my obligations. I know all that stuff.

Christian: A student raises her hand. I wonder if that's fear in the student's eyes or respect. I wonder if there is a difference to Rose. She asks Rose when would be the best time to intervene with gang kids.

Timing is Everything

Rose: *The best time to intervene with these kids is where there is a trauma, a specific crisis. Look, this life is criminalistic. Not only are you looking at death daily, but you're also looking at incarceration. Of course, both those two things are expected. It's what's going to happen. It's anticipated. I don't have a tomorrow. I only have today. I don't have yesterday, unless somebody did something to me; then I've got to check that right. I've got to get my justice. But, other*



than that, that's the only kind of future or past that I had. The present was all I thought about.

After a while though, Bloods started banging Bloods, Crips started banging Crips. So everything's getting more confused. I'm not understanding my enemy anymore. And then there was this house party where two people got shot. It started things in motion. People died. A friend died.

I was the last person to talk to him. Like I said, it started things in motion. More folks died. People blamed me. I blamed me. It was traumatic. It wasn't something that altered my wisdom; it just kind of made me think about the loyalty, start questioning people around me.

Christian: In retrospect, I think this is another central point. The crisis got her thinking: thinking about the effects of her actions on the people around her, and thinking about how events were affecting her in the long run rather than just the present. Thinking has been a key in everything Rose has said to me about intervention. She wants to get the youth to think, to reflect, to imagine, and to consider. She then expands on the idea and tells me that it's not only thinking, but thinking and *feeling* the effects on others, and on their future.

Rose: *A second thing is my little sister. I wouldn't let her kick with us, so what ended up happening was she banged the other line. She got into gangs, but she didn't follow my steps. I was a blue[Crip] fighter, and she was a red [Blood] fighter. It got me thinking.*

Those two things weighted very heavily on me. There were a lot of other things. The point is, when people are in that kind of trauma state of mind, they're more willing to look at more than just the present. There's this lady, Regi. She's is an adult advisor at GRASP. She got me looking at, and thinking about, the animosity, the confusion, the hatred, and the losses that I had within myself, for myself, because of what I had done. She got me thinking about the remorse that I didn't understand, the guilt that was there but I hadn't seen. I started to see that that was what was fueling the anger and stuff, because I didn't like who I was. Regi's been, for lack of a better way to explain, my mentor in this whole process. I hated her when I met her, couldn't stand her. I tested her and I tested her and I tested her and she stayed on with me. She's been the one who stuck it out. It took a long time.

Christian: Rose tells the class: "I hated her when I first met her. I couldn't stand her." Yet Regi is the one who has become

the mentor. Regi is White, female, and has authority, three qualities that Rose was never fond of. Yet, Regi is her mentor. As a clinician, you've got to wonder how that happens. How does the change occur? How do we get past all our differences, and when does the transformation in the relationship occur?

Rose: Plus, hell, Regi's crazy too. I mean, she didn't do the things I did, but she has her own baggage. In a way, she bangs too. So do y'all. So do all y'all.

All Y'all

Rose: Society, all y'all, every single one of you bang, if you got a job. What do your employers want? They want your trust. They want your loyalty. They want your honesty. They want you to be prompt; they want all of you. You come a dime a dozen to them. You don't want the job? Somebody else will take it. You know they want all that from you, and that's banging. It's the same thing. They want you to represent.

Hell, our worlds aren't so different after all. They just look different. Knowing that makes living in this world much easier, and so now my changes are progressing in the right way. I'm learning how to trust. I'm learning what love means.

Christian: As I listen to her words for the second time on tape, I begin to hear Rose struggling to answer some of those relationship questions, striving to connect the two worlds that she defined earlier. Those two worlds look as different to the worker as they do to the gang kids. But are they really? Is Rose so different? Is her gang world so different? Yes it is, but I think that, in all actuality, there are more similarities than differences. Focusing on the similarities is one way to begin to bridge the gap. Rose says she has emotional baggage. Regi, her mentor, also has baggage. Both have done things or made decisions they later regretted. There are many core similarities that we, as clinicians, can highlight to bridge the gap. Use of self as a therapeutic tool, as we "edumacated" people like to say. We all have baggage.

Rose: I know I'll survive. I'll always survive. That will never leave me. But now I'm learning how to live. I'm refocusing. I've been in school [college] for five years, and I still ain't got a major, but that's okay. I'm going to school.

Ain't No Pain like a Woman Scorned

Christian: A student asks about female gang members today. Are they different than when Rose began? How does Rose feel about them?

Rose: I think in one word, I'm afraid of them. OK, that was four words. When I was coming up, I came up behind my baby's dad. My baby's dad has a tattoo on his arm of our gang. I have mine on my inner thigh. I was not part of the gang system so much as I was a part of him. And girls today, and guys like them, will get beat in. You know, they do a little dirt, crime, or whatever and now females act just like guys. The reason that I said that I'm fearful is because we [women] are the nurturers. We're the lovers of the world. We do what we do for love. You know, we kinda get involved in gangs because we love this man, and we're doing all this stuff for them. Not anymore. That's not why girls get in gangs now. Now they do it for the same reason as guys. They're mad, and violence for them is automatic. And don't piss on one of them either, cause ain't no pain like a woman scorned. They're very devious about it. Now they're making their own cliques. Bernadette [a female gang member Rose is currently working with] was beat in by five dudes, five men actually. They weren't even kids. Five guys beat her onto the set, and she chose that.

Walking in Two Different Worlds

Christian: Rose talks about the different worlds: our world and the gang world. A student asks Rose how she should walk in the gang world as she's working with a gang member.

Rose: Walk carefully. Walk slowly. They'll be very confrontational with you. They'll test you, the whole way around and then back again. If you're afraid of violence,

if you're afraid to see it, then stay out of their world.

Christian: Rose talks often of getting them to think. A student asks, "Think about what?"

Rose: *Getting them to think about the things that go on with them in their world. Just everyday things like, "What made me do that?" Small things. "Why did I say that?" "Where did that come from?" "How could you do that differently?" Make them think and not just react. Hell, we don't even do that as adults in this world.*

Just Listen

Christian: A student asks Rose what the single key to working with gang members would be. That's just like academia isn't it. Wanting the keys? Wanting the specific steps—in order, please. Isn't that just like us, wanting an organized, linear list of solutions.

Rose: *Listen and guide. Don't teach. You can't teach them shit. They're not looking for a teacher. They're not looking to be taught anything. They don't even understand that they need to be taught. You let them lead you, and they'll come out of it. And when you start getting somebody to start to change, to think about the things that are going on, to start to redefine—you remember that I'm telling you this—you better have something to replace it! It's not like: can I just give you a hug or something, and then they change. It's just like the whole alcoholic thing. You can't change them unless, first of all, they recognize that they need to. And second of all, that they want to. Then you kind of have to guide them to that place where they understand how to change and what to change into. And it has to be, it has to be, that you guide them through their own mess, their own chaos. It's okay to share of yourself, and to say that yeah, I've been there. I've done that. But you can't give them information from your past because what changed and altered you, or what you've read in a book, probably won't fit them, it won't be their answer.*

Ask them to help you figure out what needs to be done. And I don't mean asking

them like [imitating a therapist, sitting up straight, hand on chin, legs crossed neatly] what do you think we should do? I don't mean like that. I mean like a conversation, a dialog. Talk about things. Be real with what's going on. That's one thing, that's why Regi's such an important part of me, because I know she's tainted. She ain't no different than me. She just didn't bang, but she made bad choices. You know, she did things that she regrets, and so that kind of opened the doorway for us.

Christian: Sound simplistic? Sound like a cliché? It's neither, but it's important to note here that this is a long, difficult process we're talking about. For Rose and her mentor, Regi, the relationship took almost three years to build. The development of a relationship with any gang youth takes time. It takes patience. It takes consistency. It takes work.

Instead of Drinking, Go Bowling.

Christian: A student asks Rose: "What do we replace the gang life with?" "What would work?" This brings a laugh from Rose. She shakes her head and tells a story.

Rose: *There's this barrier between you and them. A wall, remember? But I think there's ways to go around that. You just got to be creative, I guess. Bowling! You know that shit's boring. We went bowling. It was actually funny. It was amazing. But you try to do those things, and expose them to other things at the same time that you're trying to guide them.*

We took some kids skiing once and I think it was the funniest thing. A bunch of gang members skiing. And on the way up there, the car kept backfiring and everybody was, you know, paranoid. So all the way up there we couldn't figure out what it was. We're ducking all the way up there, and we get up there and they're mad. They don't want to do this. There's this Mexican (Joerge) who's saying, like, "Mexicans don't ski." You know, he was heated, and yet you know what? He was the last one off the mountain. I mean just giving them the opportunity to get out and do things.

Student: "I don't believe that can be enough."

Rose: I know that it's not a fix. But you got to replace what you're taking away, and it takes a lot of, what do you call that, like support and longevity, I guess. Consistency and pressure to guide this person that you're trying to change. So, to do that and open that doorway is wonderful. But what do you do with it then? You know, it's very important to find somebody that they can believe in or connect with. Also, when you work with gang kids, you don't do nine to five. You know, my time would never come before nine thirty, ten o'clock [p.m.]. You know, that's just when it started. Please! I wasn't peaked until like one thirty in the morning. So to be able to call somebody when you need them and have that connection is very important as well.

Waiting for the Connection

Student: "What's the hardest part of working with adolescents who are involved in gangs?"

Rose: The first call is always the hardest to get to. You're always waiting the longest time for them to actually, I don't know if it's getting up the nerve, or figuring out if they trust you, or what it is. For them to just call that first time. But then once it's there, then they want to call you all the time. Just be patient. Listen. Be consistent. It'll come to you.

It Came to Me Around Three a.m.

Christian: It came to me around three a.m., the reason I was so mad at Rose. That's the usual time when something like that hits me. A name I couldn't remember, a song, an author. It always comes to me early in the morning. It was a tough one for me, which explains why I got so angry. What I realized is this simple but hard truth: I have to start *all over* with every kid.

Whether you're working in the school system or an agency, politics, juvenile justice, residential or community work, time on the job and experience gives you an advantage. When you work at a place for 10,

15 years, you have a reputation and base of earned respect that you bring to the table. People listen to you and value your ideas in a manner that is not the case for someone who's brand new to the job. Experience gives you more pull, more clout.

I realized that it's not that way at all when you're working with gang kids. It doesn't matter to a single one of them that I've been working with teens since 1982. Seventeen years' experience? Means nothing. Ph.D. behind my name? Carries no weight, zero. Developed and taught courses specifically designed around adolescent violence and gang membership? Zippo. At the beginning of the relationship, my reputation means nothing. I have not earned respect. I have no clout, no credibility.

Although it may sound like it, I'm not discounting the degrees, the work experience, or the professional expertise that one gains. I'm talking about being able to set those professional trappings aside in order to open one's self up for an authentic encounter. To develop a genuine relationship with any of the gang youth, to be able to get through the depth of anger, confusion, fear, humiliation, and mistrust, you have to start at the beginning. To get around or through the wall that Rose speaks of, you have to go back to your Direct Practice 101. Authenticity. Empathic listening. Consistency. Patience. Availability. There are no short cuts. No advanced credit for previous accomplishments here. These are all fundamental in our work. In the beginning we need to connect with the gang members that we work with. We need to slowly develop meaningful relationships with them.

Conclusion

The majority of Rose's presentation focused on her vivid description of life as a gang member and how one might intervene with an individual currently in a gang. Because of her style, it would be easy to stay on the surface and simply focus on that alone. However, at a deeper level, there are valuable insights regarding our youth's lack of connection to society. Rose's presentation

highlights a larger crusade and difficult questions with which we, as social workers, must struggle.

In her self description, Rose suggests that, to a great extent, her motive for getting into the gang can be connected to her experience growing up in a family where substance abuse and violence was extreme. She also notes her negative peer group. Many of our gang youth have similar explanations. However, listening to Rose at a deeper level, one recognizes the experiences and consequences of youth who continue to search for meaning and belonging in an oppressive, discriminating culture, in a racist and sexist society that alienates minority youth. For Rose, like so many of our youth, the options are to be alone, or to "gang-up" and fight the system. She chose the latter.

If one accepts this premise, then early prevention at a societal level rather than intervention at an individual level becomes the major focus. The development of culturally responsive services for people with infants and small children is desperately needed, rather than the continued frenzy to build more prisons. Also needed is a societal discussion on the effects of racism on our youth, the effects of sexism on our young women, and the extreme anger that is built when one is forced to grow up struggling with poverty, discrimination and oppression. These issues are real and the effects are explosive. As social workers, we have a responsibility to advocate for these youth and to help society at large to lower its passive contempt and/or outright dismissal of these at-risk youth as being hopeless and untreatable. These struggles, I think, represent our real work. Welcome to the job. □

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