

Author

from page A1

father I always felt like, as a father, what could I do? I know that if I barely survived that life, how was I going to help my own son get out of it. I was concerned that I wasn't going to be able to make it, but I thought, 'Let me write some of what I went through. This is a very difficult thing to write, as you can imagine. Very few people who have been through this kind of life can write about it. I know that it has to be done. There are a few books by ex-gang members, but it's very hard to write.'

"I want to share with you the feeling that I had trying to help my son and why it connected to my own life, seeing my own son go through this. We grew up in a community that was called Humboldt Park, which in Chicago is one of the largest gang communities in the city. Chicago happens to have the second largest gang activity in the country. L.A. happens to be No. 1. That's where I grew up. I returned there, six months ago."

"Let me read you this one section where I'm arguing with my son. I'm telling him, 'You ain't going to be in no gang,' because a lot of ex-gangbangers have been through it and have kids. We're actually harder on our kids about this. They think we're not but we are. 'You ain't going to be in no gang.' That was just my attitude. But it didn't work very well."

"One evening that winter after Ramiro had come in late following weeks of trouble in school, I gave him an ultimatum. Yelling burst back and forth between the walls of our Humboldt Park flat. My 2-year-old son, Ruben, confused and afraid, hugged my leg as the shouting erupted. In moments Ramiro ran out of the house, entering the cold Chicago night without a jacket. I went after him, although by my mid-thirties I had gained enough weight to slow me down considerably."

"Still I sprinted down the gangway which led to the debris-strewn alley, filled with furniture parts and overturned trash cans. I saw Ramiro's fleeing figure, his breath rising above him like quickly dissipating clouds. I followed him toward Augusta Boulevard, the main drag in the neighborhood. People yelled out of windows and

doorways. "Que pasa, hombre?" Others offered information on Ramiro's direction. A father or mother chasing a child down the street is not an unfamiliar sight around here. A city like Chicago has so many places in which to hide. The gray and brown brick buildings seem to suck people in. Ramiro would make a turn and then vanish, only to pop up again. Appearing and disappearing. He flew over brick walls, scurried down another alley, then veered into a building that swallowed him up and spit him out on the other side.

"I kept after Ramiro until, unexpectedly, I found him hiding in some bushes. He stepped out, unaware that I was to the side of him."

"Ramiro...come home," I gently implored, knowing that if I pounded on him there would be little hope he'd come back. He sped off again.

"Leave me alone!" he yelled. As I watched his escape, it was like looking back into a distant time, back to my own youth, when I ran and ran, when I jumped over peeling fences, fleeing vatos locos, the police or my own shadow in some drug-induced hysteria.

"I saw Ramiro run off and then saw my body entering the mouth of darkness, my breath cutting the frigid flesh of night; it was my voice cracking open the winter sky."

Then Rodriguez told the audience his own story:

"I joined a gang when I was 11....At age 12, I started doing drugs....At 13, I started getting arrested for fighting, stealing, all those things. When I was 15, I dropped out of school and also my mother threw me out of the house, which, I think, she was very tired by that time. She was a very good mother, and I know that it really must have hurt her, but I was somebody at the time that she couldn't control. She didn't know what to do. She just said, 'Get out,' and I went out."

"I lived in the streets. Like I said, I wasn't in school. I was homeless in Downtown L.A., vacant lots, took a lot of heroin. At 16 years old, I was arrested in a riot and was put into an adult facility ... in L.A. How many of you guys, any of you remember Charles Manson? I had a cell right next to Charles Manson."

"The first night I was there, the two prisoners that were with me

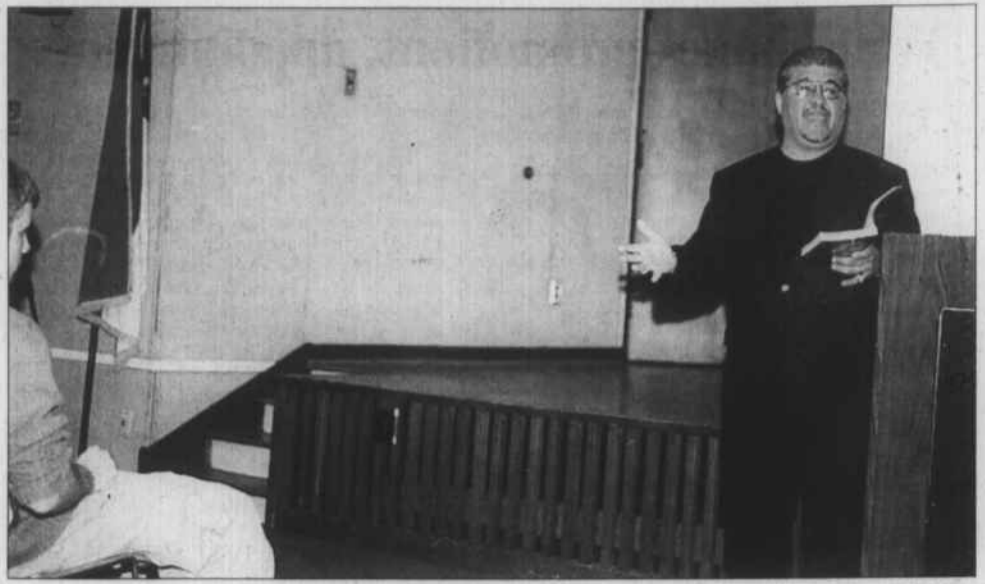
put a razor blade to my neck and were going to kill me that first night. I had to learn real quickly, but I had already learned, being in the streets, that you don't show any fear even if you're scared to death. You don't ever show in your eyes and in your voice. I just challenged them: 'If you're going to kill me, better make sure I'm good and dead. If not, I'm going to kill you. At first, I thought they were going to actually do it, and then they looked at me and cracked up and then we played cards the rest of the night. They just wanted to test me....'

"I had to learn to be real hard. I had to learn to cool down. As soon as I got out of that situation, a year later I was arrested for attempted murder in which four people were shot. I got through that. I was very good at going to my hearings...But I was also very good at getting away with things. I was very good at doing things and not getting caught, and when I did get caught, knowing how to intimidate witnesses. I'm just telling you this is how I was. My future at the time would have been like, people say, 'You're never going to amount to anything.' They used to tell me this over and over again."

"Really, I was prepared to become a gangster, Mafioso, criminal, whatever it required I was prepared to do. But something happened along the way. One is I didn't die. I wanted to die. I took a lot of drugs, OD'ed, came back. I've been shot at three different occasions, never got hit. Came back. All kinds of things. I wasn't dying. Instead my friends were dying. Like it was mentioned, 25 of them: gunshots; car accidents, being messed up, loaded; robberies; a couple suicides; and drug overdoses. I was losing everybody around me, but I wasn't going anywhere...."

At 18, he got in trouble for fighting with police.

"I was fortunate that I had people who wanted to help me out. They wrote letters on my behalf. They didn't have to do it, but those letters affected the judge, who then gave me a lesser sentence, which I did do. But I made a vow at that time, which was very hard to do, that I would never again go to jail again for any criminal act. And believe it or not, as hard as that has been, and I've



Luis L. Rodriguez reads a passage from "Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A."

Photo by Paul Collins

had my relapses, I've kept that vow.

"I also went from drugs for seven years to drinking....The drinking didn't allow me to be a good father - I had kids. It didn't allow me to be a good husband. I've been married three times. I've lived with six other women. Couldn't hold relationships. This is not bragging. This is not good. This is not what a man should be doing in this world."

"It took a long time to finally get together, and ... my son woke me up, the way a son should wake you up. If your own kids don't wake you up, who's going to do it? If you can't be there for your kids, who you going to be for? As much as I said I wanted to save him, to be honest with you, he saved me. I

have to thank him, because if we don't wake up, we can't keep blaming our kids. You know what I'm saying, they look at us. There's injustice in the streets. There's things that ain't right, but what are we doing? Don't rock no boats. Don't get involved. A kid want to know that there's meaning in their life. They want to know there's purpose. They want to know they have a purpose. Who's going to help them see that?"

"In many ways, I owe my son for waking me up. I will have to say, I will have to tell you it's hard out there; it's not easy. Unfortunately, my son didn't quite make it. He's alive, thank God. Things could have been worse. At 21 years old, he had already done two felony prison convictions. At

21 years old, he was already slated to go to the Big House. At 21 years, he was arrested for three counts of attempted murder, including against two police officers, and he was sentenced to 28 years in prison.

"I'm telling you this because it hurts to have to see your kids go through this. Whatever I did, I never wanted my kids to do. And I had to learn to finally pull it together. I had to prove to them if there's anything worthwhile in life, I had to live that life. If I'm saying, 'You live a complete and fulfilled life,' I had to learn how to be fulfilled and complete myself. Nobody's going to listen to a hypocrite; nobody's going to listen to a liar. And I had to learn not to be a hypocrite anymore...."

Alston

from page A7

Social Security number, you are required to provide it to the DMV. The state Child Support Enforcement Agency might need it to establish paternity or child support.

I had everything but an acceptable document for proving my SSN. "I can't take an insurance card," the examiner told me.

"Oh man," I said. "Do you have a pay stub with you?" he asked. I didn't at the time, but I did when I returned a few days later.

Finally, after three trips I got what I came for, my address changed and a new license. I also got a dose of reality, everyday life on the front lines at the DMV.

Nigel Alston is a radio talk show host, columnist and motivational speaker. Visit his web site at www.motivationalmoments.com.

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