

Marcus walks up to me, his hand out, ready to shake mine. Tall and slim, a crisp light blue shirt, dark pants and small diamond earrings, brown eyes direct and friendly.

At ten years old, Marcus was in a foster care group home with six other boys. At thirteen, he was a member of a violent street gang, the Pasadena Denver Lane Bloods.

"I joined for survival," Marcus says. "The boys in the home were already gang members. Until I became like them, I was victimized. I went from prey to wolf."

Thirteen-year old Marcus had to commit crimes including assaults, shootings and robberies to show that he was willing to do whatever it took to belong, and to guard their territory from the Crips, the Bloods' deadly rivals.

"I had a really screwed up belief system. I thought by doing these things I was protecting our area." Marcus grins. "The good part is that the majority of us couldn't afford to live in this area we were protecting, but we were willing to die for it."

Being a gang member gave him a sense of power and pride, of being part of something and having the duty to protect it. He had the sense that he wasn't afraid of anything, even dying.

Kids without families or who have gone through violence or trauma are especially vulnerable to becoming gang members because they believe their gang will protect them. It makes sense, Marcus says, but it's a false sense of security. Some gang members will come through, but you can't count on them.

He wore red, the color for the Bloods: red bandanas or Boston Red Sox caps, or caps from sports teams from cities that begin with the letter "P," for Pasadena, such as the Pittsburgh Pirates and the Philadelphia Phillies, Eagles and 76ers.

For money, he became a hustler, selling drugs, committing robberies. "The gang teaches you how," he says.

Marcus went from foster care to juvenile hall to jail to prison. He became addicted to drugs.

Although Bloods occupy the entire City of Los Angeles – and beyond – they're broken into small street gangs called sets. Most sets have about six members, mostly soldiers who see and hear very little beyond the set's borders.

Each set is loosely organized around a leader. He's usually a charismatic, ruthless older man with a long criminal background, who rose from the ranks because of his skills in controlling the other members in the set, usually through violence.

Marcus's set was run from an apartment building known as the snake pit. Their territory was within a one-mile radius of struggling shops, homes, apartment buildings and projects in Pasadena. For most of the twenty-seven years, Marcus belonged to the gang, he lived on the streets.

It occurs to me that gangs are like cults, probably the most extreme version of a group. Both attract people who were neglected or abused as children, and people who lack an emotionally healthy support system of family, friends and faith.

Both have charismatic leaders who demand absolute obedience. Both have an us-versus-them mentality and believe that whatever actions they take to defend their territory are justified.

Cults need territory, but their focus usually is on gaining economic power, usually through donations, through products they create, and by marketing their lifestyle and idea of spiritual healing. While gangs focus on guarding their territory, they need economic power as well. Most of their income comes from drug trafficking, theft, burglary, robbery, carjacking, extortion and identification fraud.

At age fifteen, Marcus had a son, who was put in the care of Marcus's mother. It was the first time Marcus considered leaving the gang, but it wasn't enough, he says. "I didn't care about myself and I didn't know how to be a father."

Between stints in prison, Marcus visited his son until he ran away from his grandmother's home. He joined Marcus's gang without telling Marcus, and at the age of twenty-two is already in prison.

"He made these decisions after I was in the process of changing my life," Marcus says. "I was opposed to him being a gang member."

He shakes his head. "I never thought I was his hero," he says. "I was in and out of his life. Maybe my mother and I were too tough on him."

Marcus began going to treatment centers for his addiction. "Certain seeds get planted," he says. "Even when I wasn't paying attention, I started hearing similar stories."

Four years ago, a friend took him to Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles. It changed his life.

"They took me right in," Marcus says. "I found a whole group of people who have the same interests and know the struggle. I started going to meetings and listening, and all of a sudden I started participating."

Father Gregory Boyle founded Homeboy Industries in 1988, when he was the pastor of Dolores Mission parish in Boyle Heights, one of the toughest neighborhoods in the city. It began as a program to find jobs for gang members, with the slogan, "Nothing stops a bullet faster than a job."

Now, steps from the metro station in Chinatown, the new Homeboy Industries building stands apart from all the others. Its program has become the largest gang reentry program on the planet. Fifteen thousand gang members have gone through its doors. Its focus on jobs has broadened to an eighteen-month program that includes therapy, GED prep, twelve step meetings, anger management, parenting and work readiness.

Light from its massive windows fills the main part of the building and noise and laughter fill it from inside, from men and women, short and tall, young and old, hair tamed and wild, heads bald and tattooed, all wearing Homeboy Industries shirts. They smile and greet each other with a hug, a pat on the back, an arm across the shoulder, a handshake.

Everyone seems to have a purpose. They're dusting and cleaning, working at front desk, giving tours to guests, stopping on their way to ask if they can help. Almost all smiling and proud.

Marcus started telling members of his gang that he was leaving. Most of them didn't understand. They told him that only older members in their fifties, who've put in their time, leave. He had years of gangbanging ahead of him.

Some understood. "They told me they knew I had different qualities and they were supportive," he says. "But I was lost and alone, not knowing who it was okay to be around."

He became a trainee. "The wide world opened up," he says. He found out that some former gang members from Homeboy had gone to university, traveled to other parts of the United States and beyond.

Learning how to adapt to this new world was a challenge.

"I had to change my thoughts about everything, but I had no sense of myself, so how could I change?" he says. "I'd been this mask. I'd lost touch with who Marcus was at age eleven. I had to learn to be myself and love myself. The same drive I put into killing myself, I had to put into saving myself and providing a better life for my kids. It takes a lot of work."

One of the hardest parts is learning how to be vulnerable, he says.

"There are certain things you learn as you go. Your past experiences hurt and tear you down. But you can use them as a tool in your toolbox to motivate you and give you perspective. If you forget where you came from, something as small as a bad day can seem like the end of the world. You go into your toolbox and see what you've been through to give yourself perspective."

Marcus is a peer mentor at Homeboy, helping guide trainees in the program. "I've given all my trauma, hurt and struggle a purpose," he says. "God puts some people

through the fire to help others. There's no one better to help someone like me, than me. My trainees can take my experiences and apply it to themselves."

He's happily married and has three sons. Although the older one is in prison, the younger ones are doing well. "Life is great," he says. "I'm blessed."

As much as he has achieved, Marcus still faces challenges every day. "I'm still learning how to be a great father and mentor. Twenty-seven years as a gang member doesn't go away in four years."

He does an affirmation every morning. Every night, he does the Tenth Step of Twelve Step programs, reviewing the day to see who he's harmed and where he's fallen short. The next day, he tries to correct it and improve.

I look at everyone enjoying their lunch in the noisy Homegirl Café. Most are leaning toward the others at their tables as they talk and laugh. This, too, is a community.

Marcus nods and smiles. "That's all we were looking for in the first place."