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The War that Didn't Happen

It started with small things - scribbles on the walls that many people didn't even notice, in alleyways, convenience stores, small restaurants, and bus bench shelters. The kids from the Norteño side scrawled cryptic cursive with paint pens and spray-paint at 19th Street, Sureño territory. Then the kids from 19th St. tagged the Norteño area as payback.

Then, a few weeks after the tagging had started, Henry Medina - an old-time gangster turned youth outreach worker - was driving two teenage girls home from school in the San Francisco Mission district. He saw a 17-year-old Norteño kid he regularly drove to and from therapist appointments standing in an alleyway near the 24th Street BART station.

It was just a feeling: "Something wasn't quite right," Henry thought. He rolled down the van window and pulled up.

"My homie just got stabbed on the bus," the young man, who had a shaved head, and usually a crooked grin, told him grimly. It was the Sureños who did it.

"Okay, just be cool," Henry told the kid. "Don't jump the gun. Let's find what's goin on. Let's make sure your friend is okay."

He knew that this 17-year-old was a shot-caller among the younger Norteño kids. He knew that they would want revenge for the stabbing.

It was around 4 p.m. on November 18, 2010.

Although to an outsider today the Mission district might appear as a benign, rapidly gentrifying hipster outpost, the stretch between 16th and 19th Streets was and still is also a notorious Sureño-controlled corridor, and 24th Street through 30th is Norteño territory. Even though it's just a 30-minute walk, or a 10-minute bicycle or bus ride to cross the Mission, for many Latino kids, getting home after school is rife with danger. Crossing over into a rival gang's turf - often inevitable in the very small 20 block by 10 block district - can mean getting pulled off a bus, beaten and stabbed, or getting shot at by a carload of homies from the other side.

Few people - even longtime Mission residents, including some of the parents of Norteño or Sureño kids - realize that the same neighborhood that is safe for many of its residents, known for its leftist politics, colorful murals, pupusa and burrito joints, cheap bars, dense pastel row houses, and more recently, its trendy gentrified strip of boutiques and nightclubs, is a neighborhood rigidly divided into two sides. Because of the divide, Sureños can't go to dentists located on 24th Street, and teenagers who look Latino can get shot for wearing red on 24th Street, even if they have never been in a gang.

Minutes after Henry ran into the 17-year-old at 24th Street, Ricardo Garcia Acosta, Henry's boss, got a call on his Blackberry from a different young Norteño.

"We're goin to rush 19th St.," the kid told Ricardo matter-of-factly.

The kid on the phone didn't sound panicked. But "it was like a cry for help," Ricardo said later. "They confide in us in that way - like, shit's going down, they're rushing, somebody's just got stabbed... They want us to know what's going on so we can intervene in a strategic way."

Ricardo sent a crisis response worker to the hospital to find out who the victim was, what had happened, and call his family. In the coming weeks, Ricardo's co-workers would try to connect him with therapists, case workers, and after-school programs. They would attempt to provide alternatives to the kid other than retaliating against his attackers and getting locked up—or worse.

The men work for the Northwest Community Response Network, or CRN, a program that grew out of a volunteer-run project started in the 1970s by Chicano nationalists in the Mission district. (There is also a Southwest CRN, which operates in Bayview/ Hunter's Point.) The original founders saw the police as inherently hostile to low-income Chicanos and Latino immigrants, and they wanted to end violence and addiction in their neighborhoods without having to rely on the criminal justice system, which they saw disproportionately locking up Latinos. By 2006, CRN had evolved into a less overtly ideological direct services program and began receiving city funding to operate in the Mission District and several other neighborhoods where kids experience violent encounters daily.

Today's CRN brings together men who grew up in the hood and come from gang life to work with younger homies to defuse, prevent, and intervene in violent conflict. Henry and his co-workers give youngsters rides home from school, and to therapy and probation meetings; they mediate between fighting factions; they hang out at the city's roughest schools and become friends and advisors to kids who are in and out of trouble. They side with youth at probation meetings and in court, and visit them in juvenile hall and in the hospital. When someone is shot or stabbed in a gang-related incident, a CRN crisis worker becomes the go-to person for the family of the victim, and, if the victim should die, CRN workers try to distract the other side from retaliating by getting the most volatile kids out of town on a camping or snowboarding trip. CRN workers - men who are generally respected by gang members on both sides who may fear or shun police - attend funerals and memorials, standing guard outside to dissuade the other side from attacking.

Henry, a stocky 53-year-old Puerto Rican and former pioneering graffiti artist ("Henry 161" of the United Graffiti Artists in the 1970s) is the only CRN staffer on the Mission district team not from the area. He's from the Bronx and Washington Heights in New York. He's quick to laugh in a boyish-sounding cackle, tear up, or flare in anger. He

tends to worry out loud, dramatically, in a thick New York accent, and tell near-strangers details from his life. He committed his first murder at the age of 14.

“I used to watch the big-time drug dealers, and I would tell different women to sleep with them to find out who they reported to, where they lived, what the layout of their houses was like, whether or not they answered their door holding a pistol,” he tells people now. “Then we’d go clean them out and sell the drugs ourselves.”

Henry spent 25 years of his adult life in prison, convicted of four felonies. He speculates that it’s his status as an old-time gangster, and his obvious concern for the youth he works with, that gives him influence with the kids in the Mission.

Driving around in the neighborhoods, talking to kids, and giving them rides is one of the main ways CRN keeps in touch with gang-involved kids in the community, and keeps abreast of what might be popping off in the streets later. On the afternoon of the bus stabbing, after he ran into the 17-year-old he knew, Henry dropped off the two girls and headed back to 24th Street, where the young man was waiting for his homies to show up. By the time he returned, Henry saw about 8 or 12 young men, ranging in age from about 12 to 17 years old. Despite the warmth of the sunny afternoon, the youngsters wore black hooded sweatshirts. Some wore black gloves.

“That told me those were the shooters,” he said later. The gloves, Henry knew, were meant to prevent leaving fingerprints at the scene of a crime, and to protect hands against the telltale gunpowder residue left after firing a gun.

“But these were kids,” he said later. “You need plastic gloves. Gunpowder will eat right through fabric gloves. These kids didn’t know any better - they all had regular wool gloves.”

The kids began walking toward 19th Street - Sureño territory. Exasperated, Henry trailed after them in the old but clean, gray two-door CRN van. The crowd split into two groups, walking on both sides of Mission St.

“What the fuck are you doin?” Henry shouted out the window at them from behind. “Get your asses back to 24th! You’re settin yourselves up to get hurt!”

The oldest kid, the shot-caller that Henry drove to therapy, looked back at him. “Don’t worry about this, man,” he called back to him. “We got this, we got this.”

After a few minutes, Henry called his boss, Ricardo, who was at the office ten blocks away.

“Ricardo, man, I can’t stop these guys,” he said. “I can’t piss ‘em off too much, or they’ll just turn around and get done with me. So I’m just following them down Mission, tryin to talk them into goin back.”

“Okay,” Ricardo said. “I’ma meet you at 20th Street.”

Ricardo hung up and took a deep breath.

Before Henry called, Ricardo had just gotten off the phone with a caseworker at a different agency down the street who worked with the Norteño youth who had been stabbed. The teenager was on probation and was already receiving mental health services. He was going to be okay, the doctors said. The caseworker was calling to let Ricardo know so that CRN could find the kid’s friends and anticipate their response.

Because the individual CRN staff members themselves come from the hood or gang life, gangsters and non-gangsters alike have accepted CRN’s efforts to de-escalate gang conflict and work with youth. It’s a balancing act. CRN attends meetings with the police and other city agencies but refuses to give names of clients or reveal who shot whom, or whether or not a client has legal immigration status.

After Ricardo got Henry’s call, he jumped into his gold sedan and drove up Mission St., scanning for the mob of Norteños. He hoped that he could redirect them, but he was also aware that it had been a couple of years since he had been an outreach worker. He didn’t know a lot of the main players on the streets these days - especially the youngsters.

Meanwhile, Henry, unable to stop the procession and knowing that Ricardo was on his way, decided to turn back around toward 24th Street to see if any more Norteños had arrived.

At 19th St. and Mission, Ricardo saw the group of kids a couple of blocks away, marching up both sides of the street. He hurriedly parked his car.

The kids looked formidable. They wore red handkerchiefs covering their faces; they carried baseball bats and clubs. These kids, Ricardo thought, were clearly planning on putting in some work – meaning retaliate against a rival gang.

As he walked away from his car, Ricardo heard sirens of police cars approaching. They were racing in the direction of San Francisco General Hospital. He guessed they were responding to the bus stabbing. Ricardo turned and looked again at the approaching mob of kids. He was alone. He was unarmed. He decided to try to flag down one of the police cars.

In general, CRN enjoys a polite but strained relationship with the San Francisco Police Department. Naturally, the police want CRN staff to tell them which kids are in what gangs, and disclose all the rumors of who had done what - and community workers’ refusals to do so aggravate investigators.

“We want to keep our kids alive,” Henry once said. “Cops want to arrest them.”

Cops are also sometimes suspicious of CRN workers themselves. It's a paradox. CRN works, Ricardo argues, because it hires directly out of the hood, and it is the workers' connection to the streets that gives them credibility in the eyes of the young people they reach out to. It provides an income and opportunities for gangsters coming out of prison to turn their lives around. But not everyone hired by CRN is ready for the job.

Many of CRN's mostly part-time staff members, like Henry, often live precariously close to crisis themselves. Most scrape by juggling multiple jobs. Henry works setting up stage lights at theaters and clubs on weekends. Some, because of their criminal records, have a difficult time finding employment elsewhere. Many are on parole, suffer from PTSD, or are recovering from addiction. Some are unwilling or unable to leave the street life completely. Just a couple of months earlier, Henry had to take over running a weekly Downtown High boys' lunch group after the former CRN staffer who led it was fired for drinking while on the clock and getting into fights with youth from the rival side.

At its best, CRN provides a sort of opt-out of the street life for gangsters that is respected by the community and doesn't force a renunciation or betrayal of one's former life. In this way it is a completely different approach than gang suppression efforts that punish gang membership (see sidebar). CRN provides father figures - older men who give care and support to the next generation of forgotten young men - in a besieged community where many men are locked up or killed. Through mentoring younger men, some CRN workers, like Henry, have come to reckon with their own violent pasts.

"Really, if I didn't work with youth I wouldn't be functional," Henry has said.

Police and city agencies want empirical data showing steady reductions in crime in order to continue supporting and funding CRN. But Ricardo argues that his organization's prevention efforts and successes are long-term, contextual, and hard to quantify. Ironically, Ricardo has noted, in the business of crisis prevention, one could never know for sure when the work was successful, or to what degree, since success for CRN workers was often the *absence* of a violent event.

How can you prove that a late night conversation between an outreach worker and a panicked teenager led that teenager to leave his gun at home the next day and therefore saved the life of a different kid? However, violence, when it does happen in any form, is immediately visible and its harm can be counted in injuries and lives lost. Trying to measure the absence of conflict is a conundrum Ricardo constantly faces when he churns out reports for the city and tries to explain that paying for three particularly volatile homies to get out of town on a camping trip right after their friend is shot, and then lining up jobs for them, prevents murders.

As he prepared to face off with the Norteños, Ricardo walked into the middle of the street and waved his arms, trying to flag down the cop cars he could hear approaching. One police car honked angrily and zoomed past. Ricardo tried again. A second car also honked. A third squad car nearly ran him down.

“Get out of the way, you asshole!” the cop shouted at him.

“Thanks a lot for the support,” Ricardo thought. He was going to have to face the approaching mob by himself. They were now coming up on 20th Street. Ricardo quickened his pace.

It was 4:15 p.m. in the Mission District on a weekday. Mothers and grandmothers, pushing strollers and holding the hands of small children, crowded the sidewalks. Old men inspected fruit at ubiquitous outdoor vegetable stalls, and people finished with the workday waited at bus stops. Bicyclists dodged cars and trucks trying to park. But this ordinary afternoon scene was unraveling quickly, Ricardo saw. The women holding babies stopped in their tracks as the mob of young men, holding their weapons, proceeded through the crowds on the sidewalk. The women’s faces twisted with fright. The normal hustle and bustle of the Mission seemed to freeze. Everyone turned and stared, with looks of horror, watching the youth proceed toward 19th Street.

Ricardo recognized three of the kids, but he didn’t know any of them well. Pumped with emotion and adrenaline, Ricardo, 28 years old, a father of two girls, a six-foot-three ball player, wearing a gray jacket emblazoned with “Community Response Network,” strutted up to the crowd and blocked the procession.

“What the hell are ya doing, terrorizing the community like this?” he railed at the mob. “How dare you guys have everyone around here all freaked out? What the fuck is wrong with y’all? Y’all need to turn around. You’ll put no work in while I’m around.”

The mob seemed to hesitate.

“Look where you’re at!” Ricardo boomed, continuing his lecture. “Look at your surroundings! There are hella witnesses. You guys are goin to put in work in front of hella witnesses? You guys are retarded. Lookit. There are grandmas, little cousins... You want somebody shooting somebody in front of your grandma, in front of your kids?”

Some of the kids looked deflated. “Aw, man, fuck!” they mumbled.

“Who the fuck are you?” one of the young men demanded.

“You don’t know who the fuck I am?” Ricardo responded, bristling. “That means you ain’t shit. You ain’t nobody out here if you don’t know who the fuck I am.”

The young man stepped back, surprised. The youth with the shaved head who was leading the group gave him a slight nod, as if to say: “let it go.”

“Y’all need to turn around,” Ricardo repeated.

There was silence.

The kids looked let down, “like a kid that thought they were going to get away with eating dessert before dinner,” Ricardo said later.

Many of the kids in the Mission who turn to gangs are immigrants or from immigrant families, learn English as a second language, and are starved for attention from overworked, exhausted, monolingual parents who may have fled a war-torn or impoverished country. Such kids don’t take for granted things that other youth might look forward to - soccer team practices, money for snacks, summer camp, or just having a stable parent who has resources to adequately support children. Instead, all that might seem available are forms of control and punishment, in the forms of teachers, principals, security guards, probation officers and police.

And of course, ever present, is violence: the violence of the schoolyard, the neighborhood gang wars, living with poverty, being under surveillance by police for looking like a gangster (being Latino and keeping with the current style of wearing baggy clothes), and for some, being excluded from legal citizenship status - which means not being able to get a driver’s license, find a legal job, or apply for financial aid to go to school.

For some of these young men, joining a gang may seem like the quickest and easiest path to feeling powerful in a world that seems designed for their failure.

“Come on, I’ma walk with you,” Ricardo said commandingly. He took a step forward.

There was a pause. The kids sized up Ricardo. Ricardo stood his ground and hoped for the best. A quick scan of the horizon showed that there was no one in sight who could intervene if things took a turn for the worse.

“Come on,” the youth with the shaved head said finally. He seemed to decide that nothing was going to happen with this guy standing out here, and they might as well leave. The stand off was being called off. Slowly, the kids turned around, some looking reluctant.

Later, Ricardo would hear that the Sureños on 19th St. were waiting, armed, for the Norteño mob to arrive. If the kids had been left to their own devices, a huge brawl and likely gunfire would have broken out at 19th St.

Even after the young Norteños began walking back toward their neighborhood, Ricardo was not about to take any chances. He followed the mob home. As they walked, people stared openly, obviously lumping Ricardo in with the larger group. Ricardo noticed some glares lingering on him; he was clearly the oldest, and some probably thought he was in charge. People shook their heads as the crowd passed.

But the Norteños kept their distance from Ricardo, staying ahead of him by a few feet.

For a couple of blocks, Ricardo managed to engage two of the young men, who straggled behind. “Look, man, this shit’s hella hot,” Ricardo said to them. “Y’all are stupid - you can’t put in work in the middle of the day.”

It was “risk reduction,” Ricardo said later. He was trying to get them to understand that, if they were going to be gangsters, there was etiquette to follow, that one should act with dignity, show respect. “Gangster-isms,” Ricardo called it.

CRN workers don’t necessarily tell youth to leave the gang life, which within swaths of the Mission district is messily interwoven with family and community (if all of one’s childhood best friends, sister and cousins are Sureños, is it realistic for them to renounce all Sureño ties?). Rather, CRN workers steer youth toward personal achievements that build stability - like graduating from school, keeping a job, or being a good parent - and try to keep people from getting too caught up in the more harmful or dangerous aspects of gang life, like regularly selling drugs or engaging in violence.

One of the Norteño boys, Ricardo knew, was undocumented. “All it takes is one little stupid fight, and you can get deported, you know,” Ricardo reminded him as they walked. “You gotta be smarter than that.”

The youth nodded, mumbling occasionally, “Yeah.”

Ricardo was now glad that he hadn’t been able to flag down those cops. The kids were listening to him, and no one had gotten arrested. The Norteños were walking home. From constant incoming texts and calls to his Blackberry, Ricardo knew that there were three vans, driven by Henry and volunteers from partner agencies, currently roaming the Mission, keeping an eye out for anything brewing. CRN’s outreach worker for the Sureño side, Victor Serrano, had succeeded in getting twelve kids who had been hanging out on the street - “potential victims,” Ricardo said later - to move into the portable trailer at 14th and Mission where CRN has a couple of computers for the youth to use.

As he concluded his mental checklist, Ricardo felt a surge of pride. It was all the years of work and relationship building that he and his co-workers did that made solutions like this - temporary though they might be - possible. It was the best of all possible outcomes, given the situation.

At 24th Street, Ricardo stopped. “Y’all cool?” he asked the mob. “Y’all not goin nowhere?”

At that point, a van driven by two caseworkers from the nearby Precita Center, who worked with these young men, pulled up.

Ricardo breathed a sigh of relief. He could turn the kids over to his community partners and turn around. A sudden mental image of a parking ticket on his dashboard flashed before his eyes. If he hurried back, he thought, he might move his car just in time to avoid a fine. Besides, there was still lots to do. He and his co-workers needed to get as

many people as possible out of the streets. This intervention, though successful, was temporary. But violence had been averted.

Henry, who had been circling around the neighborhood, came and picked up Ricardo in the van a few blocks away from 24th St. At one point while he drove, Henry stiffened. He thought he had heard something.

“But I didn’t say nothing, because I didn’t want to seem foolish,” he said later.

Then the two men heard the sound of tires screeching, and smelled the burning rubber of tires.

That same afternoon, around four, about forty-five minutes before Henry and Ricardo heard the ominous sounds, while the group of Norteños were marching up the street, eighteen-year-old Antonio Valdez-Hernandez had gotten a call while he was hanging out with his girlfriend and three-week-old son.

At around four-thirty, Antonio left his house, which was near the Glen Park BART station, a ten-minute drive from the Mission. He drove into the Mission and parked his car in the McDonald’s parking lot at 24th and Mission.

Antonio had recently attended one of Henry’s weekly boys’ lunch group at Downtown High School, where he was a senior. The lunch group met every Thursday in a portable trailer with a cheap, dirty carpet and crumb-covered, formless couches. Henry distributed free McDonald’s hamburgers to about a dozen young men who had been identified by their school counselor as being at risk of or involved in gangs. Antonio had been involved with the Norteños a couple of years earlier.

On the day that Antonio went to the lunch group, Henry was sharing his personal story with the young men. Henry recalled seeing Antonio- thin, light-skinned, with a wispy mustache and dark brown hair pulled back in a low ponytail.

“This young man wants to turn his life around,” the school counselor had told Henry. Antonio’s girlfriend had just given birth to his son.

Henry - whose life story “can make the toughest gangster cry,” Ricardo once said - spared no details. He told the boys about how his father, who brutally beat his mother, normalized violence in his life from an early age. He shared how he had lost his partner, “the only person I ever trusted with my life,” and beloved family members due to crime, gangs and drugs. He talked about spending half of his life in prison, and worse still, growing older and becoming fully aware of how much pain and misery he had caused for other people. Since Henry’s release from prison ten years ago, he has dedicated his days to trying to keep youth like he once was - Latino men from working class families, with criminal records and few legal opportunities - from suffering the same fate he endured.

“You don’t want to be like me, 53 years old with nothing but change in your pocket,” he said. “I can’t even sleep like a regular person. I have PTSD. I cry myself to sleep every night because of what I’ve done. I have nightmares. I sleep two or three hours at a time, if that.”

Antonio had watched him. He didn’t say anything.

The following week, on his afternoon outreach rounds, Henry started hearing about a Norteño kid named “Sleepy” from some of his youth clients from a different gang. They told him that Sleepy was acting reckless and needed to stay away from a housing project near Cesar Chavez St. (which was still referred to as Army St., which it used to be called).

Henry asked the Norteño kids he knew who Sleepy was. One of them pointed out a young boy with long hair who stood in the McDonald’s parking lot.

Henry approached the boy and warned him “to stay away from the Army St. boys.”

“What are you talking about?” the boy asked with a puzzled smile. Then he asked, “Don’t you remember me?”

Henry, whose memory was sometimes terrible, paused.

“I’m Antonio,” the boy said. Sleepy was his nickname. “Also, I know your brother.”

Antonio’s mother, Suzy Valdez, was an old friend of Henry’s older brother and used to go out salsa dancing with him. Henry’s elder brother by two years had the same distinctive cackle as Henry, and had known Antonio since the boy was six years old. Henry had never met the boy, but he had met Suzy. Henry had called Suzy a few days after the lunch group and left a voice message to invite Antonio on a field trip to Great America, an amusement park. Suzy recognized Henry’s voice, and then his name. She told Antonio about the coincidence.

“Mom, you know *everyone*,” Antonio had said in response.

After Henry talked to Antonio in the McDonald’s parking lot, he called Suzy immediately to warn her to keep an eye on her son.

“She was in complete denial,” Henry said later, shaking his head. “She said, ‘That can’t be my Antonio. He’s not in the gang any more.’”

One week after Henry had called Antonio’s mom was the afternoon of the bus stabbing.

After Antonio parked his car in the parking lot, he ate a burger at McDonald’s. He smoked a cigarette. Then he walked from 24th and Mission onto Capp St., a small

residential street parallel to Mission. Right around the corner was the group of Norteño kids Ricardo had just walked home.

Antonio was walking by himself. He noticed but didn't pay attention to a young, light-skinned male wearing a hooded sweatshirt approaching him.

When the young man was a few feet away, he pulled out a gun from his hoody pocket. He shot twice, aiming at Antonio's chest. It was such close range that Antonio could feel the heat of the gun as it fired.

The first bullet pierced his right shoulder, hitting an artery going to his heart and exited through his left arm. His lungs collapsed and began filling with blood. The second bullet went through his chest and severed his spine, where it lodged itself between his eighth and ninth vertebrae. Antonio crumpled onto the sidewalk.

The shooter kept shooting after Antonio had fallen. Antonio heard seven or eight shots. He thought to himself that the bullets must have missed, because he could hear them hitting other things. He thought he heard one whiz past his ear.

The shooter ran away.

Antonio tried to pick himself up. "Something's wrong," he thought. His legs lay in a heap. They seemed to be turned at an angle that was wrong. He couldn't move. His body felt like Jell-o.

Antonio coughed up blood. He was lying on a driveway of a house, and he saw the house's occupants watching him from the windows above.

He thought about his newborn son. "I didn't even get a chance to know him," he thought.

Dusk began to fall. Cars drove by without stopping.

Less than five minutes after Antonio was shot, a white Ford Crowne Victoria pulled over. Inside were two friends of Antonio's. They recognized him, scooped him up and dumped him in the back seat. Panicked, the driver zigzagged haphazardly down the wrong side of 24 St. The driver ran three stop signs and nearly hit the CRN van Ricardo and Henry were in.

"Oh, shit," Ricardo thought as he watched the white Ford pass and felt his stomach sink. Then he heard the police sirens. He and Henry exchanged glances, and Henry tried, in vain, to pursue the white car. They lost it, because the car continued to run red lights.

"I bet that car's going to the hospital," Henry said. The two men drove to San Francisco General Hospital.

The Crowne Victoria was being followed by another car - undercover police officers. When Antonio's friends arrived in the parking lot, they had barely stepped out of the car before they were put in handcuffs and arrested.

By the time Ricardo and Henry arrived in the CRN van, the white car was cordoned off by yellow police tape.

"It's hard not to feel disappointed when - despite our best efforts, violence happens," Ricardo said later. "There were three community vans out there. I had the crisis responder at the hospital. I was on the street with the Norteño kids. But still - we couldn't prevent what happened." But, he told Henry and reminded himself, "If we hadn't been out there, things would have spiraled out of control even more."

Nonetheless, the unanswerable questions nag Ricardo. Was there something else he could have done? If CRN had more funding and could have deployed more staff in more vans to more locations, could Antonio's shooting have been prevented?

Suzy, Antonio's mother, arrived at General Hospital about an hour and a half later. She had been weeping the entire way on the BART train from Concord, where she worked as a customer service representative for an insurance company. The San Francisco police and gang task force was there, along with Henry, Ricardo, and CRN's crisis response worker, who had been at the hospital since the earlier bus stabbing.

In the operating room, doctors reconstructed Antonio's ruined artery. They gave him 20 blood transfusions. They debated whether or not they should attempt removing the bullet in his spine. If they left it, he would probably not be able to walk again. If they removed it, they risked damaging his spine further. Antonio might then be paralyzed from the neck down. They decided to leave it in.

That night, after Henry had left the hospital, Antonio's mother called him. The doctors said that Antonio would live, but he had only a 5 percent chance of ever walking again.

"We were all in denial," Henry said later. It wasn't the first time Henry had heard such news.

The following Thursday, at the Downtown boys' lunch group, Henry got the Norteños - Antonio's friends - together.

"There was a lot of anger on that side," he remembered.

Henry told the assemblage of young men, "Look, I need you guys to stand down. We need to find out what happened. In the meantime, Antonio has a baby that needs to eat."

He looked at them. It was cold in the portable trailer. The teenage boys sat and slouched in hard folding chairs and on the couches, dressed in black hoodies, baggy blue jeans, and wearing black knit caps and ball caps. Some had facial hair and looked like grown men.

Others had the smooth cheeks and the lanky limbs of awkward adolescence. Some watched him attentively. Others looked down at their hands.

“You find out who your true friends are when you’re in jail, or in the hospital,” Henry said to them. “Well, Antonio’s in the hospital now. What are you guys goin to do for him?”

“I dunno, what can we do?” the boys muttered.

Henry collected money from the boys and used it to buy 1,000 size 2 and 3 Pampers diapers, a case of special infant formula, and 2,000 wipes.

Antonio lay in a coma for 17 days. He dreamed, but he never woke. During that time, Suzy more or less moved into the hospital. She took a leave of absence from work. Every other day, Henry would come visit her and Antonio.

When Antonio finally awoke in December, he could only move his mouth. But he wasn’t able to speak because he had tubes in his mouth. He regained the use of his arms shortly after he awoke, but his lungs would collapse again, requiring an additional operation. He would spend three months in hospitals.

The next time Henry visited Antonio in the hospital, the young man was heavily drugged and drifting in and out of awareness. But he squeezed Henry’s hand when Henry told him about the diaper collection he had undertaken.

In January, Antonio was released from the hospital. In February, he celebrated his 19th birthday at home with his mother, brother, girlfriend, and son.

Five months after his shooting, Antonio lay in a bed in the refurbished basement of his mother’s house, watching a documentary on the Sureños. He wore a black t-shirt and a black knit cap. His back was still broken, and he had trouble sleeping for more than ten minutes at a time because of the pain, he said. His smile was sweet and frequent. He was alert in the way quiet people often seem. Like many teenage boys, he understated his feelings (“I thought, ‘damn,’” he said of his reaction when, post-coma, the doctor informed him he wouldn’t walk again), but he described his injuries and surgeries with surprising animation - similar to the way car enthusiasts describe repairs and parts.

His mom had mentioned that he was getting calls from a recruiter at the Academy of Art, where he had participated in a summer program last year. Perhaps he would take up drawing again? Antonio looked nonchalant. “Yeah, maybe.”

No one was arrested for his shooting. The two friends who drove him to the hospital were both released.

Was Antonio’s shooting gang related? Was he still involved with the Norteños?

“He was in the wrong place at the wrong time,” his mother said firmly. “He’s been focusing on school, going to counseling for the last two years.”

“Cops don’t look for nobody in this area,” Antonio said. “If you get shot, they act like, oh yeah, we’re looking... They ain’t goin to find nobody. And they’re not goin to really care.”

Once, when he was fifteen, a cop picked up Antonio and dropped him off in Sureño territory, he said. “He dropped me off on 19th St. and yelled, ‘Ey, we got a Norte right here,’ and drove off. They just left me down there. I got chased up the street by eight of them... chasing me with bottles.” He made it to 24th, and they turned around.

The cops aren’t trying to stop gangs, Antonio said. And they wouldn’t be able to anyway, even if they did try.

“Just let it be,” he said, smiling. “Cuz it’s just goin to continue goin. There’s always goin to be a younger generation, and a younger generation, lookin at videos, listening to that music. They’re goin to want to bang.”

Who shot Antonio remains a mystery. Many, including Ricardo, assumed that Antonio was shot by Sureños because he had been known as an active Norteño. But Henry, recalling the warnings to Sleepy, wonders if it was the gangsters from the Army Street projects who warned him to stay out of their hood. Or, perhaps it was a set-up by personal enemies of Antonio.

“Only Antonio knows who shot him,” Henry said later. “And maybe Antonio doesn’t even know.”

Antonio says he didn’t see the face of the person who shot him. But - in a culture that abhors and punishes snitches - he probably wouldn’t say either way.

For Henry, Antonio’s injury brought memories of an earlier tragedy. A boy that Henry had raised and considers as a son, Jose Reyes, was also shot and paralyzed by a bullet. Today, Jose is serving five consecutive life sentences in federal prison in New York. Jose’s life and role as a shot-caller in the Wild Cowboys, a notorious New York gang, is chronicled in two books - *Gangbusters* and *Wild Cowboys*.

“He wanted to be like me,” Henry said. “He wanted to be a drug dealer making big money.”

Henry taught Jose how to deal heroin. But he always said to him, “Whatever you do, do not sell crack. When you sell a bag of heroin, they get high, and then they go to sleep and leave you alone. When you sell to crack addict, he won’t leave you alone.”

It was the 1980s in the Bronx. The crack epidemic was blowing up in New York City.

Henry was in and out of prison while Jose was a teenager. Jose, at the urging of his friends, began selling crack - which was more profitable than heroin. Jose became a high-up member of the Wild Cowboys, and word on the street said he was calling the shots in many crack-related murders of the era.

In 1991, Henry was back in prison. Jose walked into a store and was shot in the back by someone on the street who got away. Jose was paralyzed from the waist down.

“I told him I hoped he learned his lesson,” Henry recalled.

But Jose wouldn't leave the gang life. “I'm in it to win it,” Jose told Henry. From his wheelchair, Jose gave orders to kill those he suspected had a hand in shooting him.

“It was killing me in there, but at that time, that was the lifestyle we lived,” Henry recalled. “That stuff was part of the game - getting shot, getting killed, getting paralyzed. So I handled it differently then than now - with Antonio.”

Jose rode in a bulletproof van and wore a bulletproof leather jacket. He modified a car so that it was like something out of a James Bond movie - it could squirt oil onto the street, supposedly to dissuade pursuing vehicles.

“You need to stop!” Henry would tell him from prison over the phone. “Bro, who the fuck do you think you are? You're going to get busted.”

But Jose thought he was untouchable, Henry said, shaking his head.

In 1997 the first person ever to be extradited from the Dominican Republic to the U.S., a notorious hired killer later indicted of 14 murders pointed his finger at Jose. He said that the 14 crack-related murders he had carried out had all been at the behest of Jose.

The last time Henry saw Jose was before the boy was shot and paralyzed, before Henry went back to prison.

“I got tired. I got real *tired*,” Henry said, looking serious. “And I realized I wasn't goin nowhere. I said, I'ma try something different. The last time I was arrested, with 800 bags of heroin, I was sentenced to 20 years. I decided it was time to hang up my gloves. I had lost my partner, my money, my son.”

While he was in prison, Henry converted to Islam. He often wears a crocheted black kufi.

“It taught me how to be a stronger character. I value life now. I value people's lives,” he said with passion. “I really care now for people. When I was young I didn't care.”

Henry paused. His eyes were filled with tears.

“It’s more traumatizing to me now, with Antonio, than it was with Jose,” he said.
“Because that was expected. Something bad was expected, because we were dealing with bad people. But with Antonio, here I am trying to help this kid turn his life around. I warned him and it didn’t work. I couldn’t save his life!”

“I had something to do with this,” Henry said, sounding strangely calm. “I could have been more aggressive. If I could have approached the problem more aggressively I could have prevented him getting shot.”

He was quiet.

“You know, this is bigger than me,” Henry said finally, with a sigh. “I can’t stop it. This - gangs, violence - has been going on since before I was born. It’ll continue after I die. All I can do is know I’ve done the best I could.”

Gang suppression sidebar:

The Sureños and Norteños in the Mission can trace their roots back to two prison gangs, the Mexican Mafia and Nuestra Familia, respectively. Both gangs were founded in California prisons during the late 1950s and 1960s to defend Latino prisoners against guards and white supremacist gangs. The leadership of both sides is still based in prison today. These elders make decisions that the young foot soldiers on the streets execute.

Gangs are not new. In the U.S., gangs appeared on the scene in 1783, following mass migrations into new urban centers after the American Revolution. Gang membership swelled again in Northeast cities in the early 1800s during the Industrial Revolution. A century later, gang activity surged among black youth during the Great Migration - a period from 1910 to 1945 when some 2 million African Americans left the Southern U.S.

“Gangs have formed all over the world whenever and wherever industrialization and related processes drive people into cities,” University of Illinois Professor in Criminal Justice and Urban Studies John Hagedorn wrote in *The Global Impact of Gangs* in 2005.

Gangs, as Hagedorn defines them, are “organizations of the socially excluded,” he contends

Increasingly harsh policing of gangs and longer stretches of confinement at younger ages are the gang suppression tactics in vogue. In California, youth 14 and older can be charged as adults. More than half of U.S. states have “enhancement” laws that add on penalties for crimes if prosecutors can deem them gang-related.

California’s gang enhancement law, enacted in 1988, adds between 2 and 10 years to felony sentences, limits parole options, and can be applied to juvenile cases. Since the

same time, a growing number of California cities - now 60 - have also been experimenting with civil public nuisance lawsuits, known as gang injunctions, that make it a crime, punishable by six months of prison time, for certain alleged gang members to gather together, wear gang colors, or be out past curfew in neighborhood where they live and hang out. In the Mission district, eighteen men are named in the civil suit brought by the City Attorney, based primarily on police testimony. Gang injunctions, because they are not criminal suits, bypass due process protections afforded to defendants in criminal trials, such as the right to a lawyer.

Gang injunctions also target people of color disproportionately, says the American Civil Liberties Union, who filed a suit against the city of San Francisco's injunction against the Norteños. In San Francisco, injunctions have targeted historically Latino, black, and Asian neighborhoods that are undergoing gentrification.

In California, only one injunction targets a white gang. This despite a 2007 Justice Policy Institute report, *Gang Wars: The Failure of Enforcement Tactics and the Need for Effective Public Safety Strategies*, which found that "the public face of the gang problem is black and brown, but whites make up the largest group of adolescent gang members."

Critics also say the gang enhancement laws and injunctions punish people who had been in gangs but left. Defending attorneys are forced to answer for all of a client's past affiliations with any documented gang members, whether or not they are relevant to the current charges.

Some of the tactics used to suppress gangs clearly only make them more powerful. Efforts by U.S. law enforcement to eliminate gangs during the 1990s by deporting undocumented members of the Los Angeles Mara Salvatrucha and MS-13 gangs made them transnational instead, when individuals who had been deported set up bases of operation from El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico.