

Gangs and Troubled Teens in Hawaii



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Kanani Santos, right, once destined for the street, was saved by a youth program and a foster mother, Allene Uesugi, with whom she is shown in her Waianae home.



FL MORRIS / Bo Acoba, 17, shown in his family home in Waipahu, he had dropped out of Waipahu High School before getting counseling with Adult Friends for Youth, where he recently completed an eight-month anti-gang program.

By Alexandre Da Silva

BO ACOBA, a lone troublemaker in middle school, started hanging out with a group of students for protection during his freshman year at Waipahu High School.

With his "boys" at his side, the then 15-year-old used and sold drugs, got drunk, carried weapons, cut classes and made more use of his fists than his head.

"When I got to high school, it was one bigger environment, bigger trouble, and I had to stay with somebody for backup," explains Acoba, who has the word "respect" tattooed across one forearm, "and that's why I joined the Barcadas."

So it was out of loyalty, he says, that he stabbed two students from a rival Kalihi gang two years ago when his friends were outnumbered in a territorial brawl. The injured students did not press charges, which Acoba says proves he acted in self-defense.

But on that Halloween night - as Acoba tossed his knife into a stream and burned his bloodstained clothes - he discovered how quick his life could have slipped away if he were at the opposite end of the blade.

"You realize after that, what if somebody shoots you, or robs you, what if you get lickin's like that? No matter how high you go, you always come down," says Acoba, who dropped out of high school, but later started going to counseling with Adult Friends for Youth, a nonprofit anti-gang group.

Acoba escaped gang life but social workers and observers worry that more at-risk isle students, like Acoba, are turning to gangs. And they complain that the state has ignored

gangs by cutting programs credited with bringing the problem under control about a decade ago.

This summer, Bo Acoba, now 17, graduated with 20 classmates from an eight-month anti-gang program. He plans to attend college in Las Vegas in the spring to start over, he said, adding, "I know I can change from there."

KANANI SANTOS lost hope in life when she was 13.

Abandoned by a young mother and with her father in jail, Santos turned to classmates who went to Waianae Intermediate School to pick fights and unleash her anger.

"I wouldn't even wait for trouble to come to me," she recalls. "I would be the one to cause the trouble. I didn't have any reasons to fight with anyone, but I made reasons."

When school counseling did not work, Santos' foster mother, Allene Uesugi, forced her to attend the Boys and Girls Club.

"She never wanted to be there," Uesugi said, "but the staff were very nurturing. They listened to her problems because this kid came in with so much baggage it wasn't funny."

Now 17, Santos is getting A's and B's as a junior at Waianae High, playing soccer and interning at the Waianae Coast Comprehensive Health Center as she pursues a career in nursing or psychology.

Her story is one example of the critical role social service agencies play in catching at-risk youth before they pick the street over the classroom. Oftentimes the groups are what prevents some of the 15 percent of children who drop out of the public education system each year from entering a lifestyle of drugs, crimes and gangs.

"Their parents are lost, incarcerated or drugged-out homeless, so Grandma and Grandpa care for them," Flora Nash, vice principal of Nanakuli High and Intermediate School, said about Waianae Coast students during a recent community meeting to discuss splitting up the campus to improve student safety. "All of a sudden they are raising kids who are strung out, runaways and prostituting. I have cases like that, and that's for real in this community."

IN 2002, the most recent time the state Department of Health surveyed sixth-, eighth-, 10th- and 12th-graders from public and private schools about gangs, it found that about 11.3 percent of the more than 28,000 students reported being involved in a gang. They answered "yes" to questions like "Have you ever belonged to a gang?" "Did the gang have a name?" and "Are you currently in a gang?"

Youth gangs are not limited to schools in poor or urban neighborhoods, but they are more prevalent on campuses where a large portion of students are labeled "economically disadvantaged," social workers say.

Oahu schools Farrington, McKinley, Waianae, Kaimuki, Nanakuli, Waipahu, Waialua and Kahuku all have more than half of their students in that category. Statewide, about 40 percent of the more than 178,000 public school students come from poor backgrounds.

Neglected by parents who work multiple jobs, students from poor families often join gangs because they feel inferior and see no future in education, said Sid Rosen, who retired this year as head of Adult Friends for Youth, a nonprofit that works with gangs in Hawaii. Gangs are formed along ethnic lines but also by students who share housing projects or street blocks, he said.

"They are living essentially in what is an urban ghetto. If you live in Kalihi, you see yourself as being different than someone who lives in Hawaii Kai," Rosen explained. "The rich haoles live in Hawaii Kai and Kahala, and us poor Filipinos live in Kalihi and us poor Samoans live in Kuhio Park Terrace. ... These boundaries get established."

"One of the things you'll notice here, and I don't think anybody wants to say it publicly, there's a lot of the racial differences, or the ethnic differences that tend to magnify" the gang issue, Inkyo said, saying Filipino students often clash with those from Micronesia. "There's that kind of uneasiness."

Those tensions were what swung Molokai Maumalanga into a life of drinking, partying and crime when he moved here from Tonga 20 years ago.

Growing up near Tamashiro Market in Kalihi, Maumalanga joined a gang in third grade, when he was only 8 years old, after he got tired of being bullied. He eventually hooked up with an older gang, for whom he would initially hide weapons for a few bucks or a burger, then go on joy rides to torment neighboring gangs as a member of the Cross Sun.

And it was not until Maumalanga was arrested in a drive-by shooting involving the rival Pinoy gang that he decided to quit and face his enemies in a meeting set up by Adult Friends for Youth.

"I think that really changed my perspective on things. That is where the change started," said Maumalanga, a stocky 31-year-old who graduated from Honolulu Community College this year and now works for Adult Friends for Youth. "Since that day, the peace just spread among gangs in Kalihi. Word spread that we had buried the hatchet."