

# Working Against Gang Violence at Richmond High

By Nicholas Kusnetz

On a Friday afternoon, Gonzalo Rucobo walks the halls of Richmond High School, talking with students and keeping an eye out for trouble. Rucobo, whose work brings him to both schools and San Quentin, is a gang intervention worker and the Northern California regional manager for the Amer-I-Can Program, a life-skills and development curriculum.

Richmond High is essentially divided in half: members of the Norteño gang, despite their name, stay on the south side of the building, while Sureños stay on the north, and mixing back and forth usually means trouble. But things are improving thanks in part to the work of Rucobo and his team, who first came to the school last year, said Dr. Orlando Ramos, the school's principal.

"Our suspensions, our violent incidents, they went down 30 percent last year," Ramos said. "It was absolutely amazing. It was great work."

Founded in 1988 by NFL Hall-of-Famer Jim Brown, the Amer-I-Can program has been implemented nationally from prisons and juvenile detention centers to schools and communities. The program helps people manage their lives, from family relationships to financial stability, in order to address larger social issues such as violence and unemployment.

Rucobo mostly works at four schools in the East Bay, where he grew up, and at San Quentin State Prison. On this day, there was a fight during lunch, and Rucobo was called in after it broke up. Sitting in a windowless room with school security staff, two teenage boys, one with splotches of blood on his shirt, showed a combination of defiance and shame. One kid was Norteño, the other from a small, rival spin-off gang.

Rucobo went to work, explaining the travails of gang life, why it isn't worth it.

"How many gang-bangers you know that are 90-years-old with retirement and medical?" he said.

In case the kids were ready to ignore his words as those of just another adult, he told them his background.

Rucobo, 37, grew up in Richmond and was once a gang member himself. As a kid, he glamorized the gang life that his cousins led. Then at age 12, after his parents got divorced and his father played only a part-time role in his life, he began "banging."

"I really wanted to be a part of that gangster lifestyle," he said.

But in 1991, his wife and two baby daughters were shot at while she was driving his car. They were not hurt, but the event shook Rucobo.

"When that moment happened, everything made sense," he said.

Rucobo, who was a warehouse and mailroom worker at the Oakland Army Base, began working to bring kids off the street and into his church in his spare time. He got into music and helped organize concerts with old Latin rockers and new rap artists. At one show, they passed out brown rags for people to wear instead of blue and red, the gang colors. Soon, he began full time gang intervention work. He started with Amer-I-Can a year and a half ago.

Because of his past, Rucobo has a network with gang members of all ages in Richmond that he uses to keep a pulse on what's going on.

"He's done it better than anyone I've ever seen," Ramos said. "When you deal with gangs, it's crucial that they trust you. Gonzalo has had that trust for a long time."

Last year, about 30 kids took part in the life-skills classes taught at Richmond High by Amer-I-Can, Ramos said. The curriculum teaches kids to de-escalate violent situations and puts an emphasis on self-ownership and self-pride. While the short-term goal is to stop violence, the work is about education, said Darryl Robertson, who coaches the girl's basketball team and runs a summer league with Rucobo.

"Most of my kids, they don't think they can go to college, just because this is Richmond High," he said.

Last year, only 18.2 percent of students at the school had completed the required courses for University of California, California State University admission, according to the School Accountability Report Card.

But while suspensions may be down, the threat of violence is still there. A couple of weeks ago, a mob of about 200 kids amassed in the street in front of school. Rucobo was able to make his way into the crowd and talk down a leader of the group before a fight started, he said.

It is this hands-on work that Ramos likes most.

"I think one of the mistakes that urban schools make is that we isolate gang members," he said. "We forget that these kids are leaders. Yeah, they're leading for the wrong reasons, but they are leaders."