

## Stand on Your Own Feet

I see that now that in my early life I was missing something and I made a lot of bad choices to try to fix that. One thing led to another but joining a gang is the worst decision I ever made. Being in a gang made all the other bad choices easier because I was with other guys who were making those bad choices with me. Maybe my story will help someone else.

### Early life

My life as a child was hell. I was sexually abused 3 times before I was 8 years old. My stepfather beat me. He wasn't a real father. He was just a drug addict. My biological father was in the army and always away. I only saw him 1 time a year when he came home for 2 weeks in the summer. That wasn't enough.

When I was 6, I started hanging with a kid whose daddy was a police officer. We stole candy from the store together and sold it at school to buy sling shots. I hated school. I guess I wasn't smart. I had to repeat the 1<sup>st</sup> grade. I was bullied by the kids and paddled by the teachers. If I didn't understand something they'd say, "oh well" and move on instead of explaining it to me.

I learned about gangs when I visited our family up north. I had 15 cousins and probably 10 of them were in a gang. After I was abused the second time, I asked my uncles, who were all gang members, if I could join their gang because I wanted protection. They said 'no.'



### Gang Life

Later, when I was 12 years old, I finally did become a gang member. To join the gang, I had to do a drive-by on a bike: I shot at a group of other gang members on the street. I never found out if I killed anyone.

After I joined a gang, my life changed. I started smoking, drugging and dealing. I skipped school, started carrying a gun and quit hanging with my friends who didn't do those things. I used the money I made from selling drugs to buy \$100.00 shoes and expensive clothes to show off.

I stayed out all night and fought with my mom and stepdad. Once I pulled a gun on my stepfather. I told him to stop jumping on me or I'd kill him. He never touched me again. I turned into a violent person who shot first and asked questions later.

### Lessons Learned

I now realize that I joined a gang because I was hurting and needed to feel like I belonged. I tell young guys, "It doesn't fix the problem so don't head down that path. Once you're in a gang, you can't get out."

When you hang around guys who are in a gang, 96% of the time you'll join a gang, too. Don't even associate with them. Don't be impressed with the nice clothes or guns or how people fear them. One way or another, they're going down and they'll take you with them. All my uncles are now serving life sentences for murder except one and he's been on the run (from the police) since the 80s.

Gang members don't love each other. They *use* each other. As soon as you go to jail, your gang brothers will forget about you. They won't send you money or make sure your family is taken care of. While you're rotting away in prison, they'll be recruiting your little brother to take your place.

You don't need a gang to feel powerful. Stand on your own feet. Find adults and friends who want what's best for you. I wish I had respected and loved myself more when I was a kid. Think, young brothers. Don't waste your life like that!

