

CARLOS' EXPERIENCE INCARCERATION LEADS ONE YOUNG MAN TO CHANGE

My name is Carlos Granados. I lived in the community of Highland Park in Los Angeles most of my life where I had been a Highland Park gang member since age 12. Although I managed to keep myself out of trouble most of the time, I am currently incarcerated for a shooting that took place in April 1998, just outside my house.

Prior to this incident, I met my girlfriend, Melanie, and we started to go out. At that time, I tried to leave my anger and grudges behind by occupying myself with a job and a college program. I thought I had hung it up, but my pettiness and grudges kept me looking for trouble to the point where I not only gang-banged with rival gang members, but turned against members of my own gang.

I used to be proud of my gang membership and never had faith in anything other than myself. Needless to say, I thought very little of my own life and the lives of others. I always packed the biggest gun, not to mention the biggest ego, and was proud to be recognized as one of the "good homies."

When I was first exposed to this Buddhism, I never thought I would actually be practicing it. Like I said, I never believed in anything. And I thought, "How could having faith bring you happiness and benefit?" I didn't know about karma before this, and although it was evident in my environment at the time that I was making bad causes, I always figured, "As long as you don't get caught, you don't have to worry about what you do." I always believed that "it would never happen to me." I have never been more wrong about anything in my entire life. All the bad karma I created for myself has now come back to me in the form of what I am now struggling with. Cause and effect is very strict!

My mother and I had only seen each other on rare occasions because I was out doing drugs or with the gang. I lost my job and ended up dropping my classes. I would get sick with a fever at least once a month. For a year straight I could not stop myself from getting progressively worse — unhappier. I literally took a nosedive into hell when it happened: my neighbor and I shot at three guys who came by to shoot up our street. We ended up injuring a little girl who lived on the block.

It has taken this, the complete shattering of my life, to break the cycle of bad karma, which I was willingly a part of. This in itself has proved to be a great opportunity as this negative experience was what led me to start chanting in the first place.

I began chanting on April 1, 1998, in a holding cell at the Northeast Los Angeles Police Department and received many benefits. I prayed for the little girl to live through her injuries. Within one month she was released from the hospital and she returned to school in perfectly good health. I have continued to chant for her good health and well-being. My mother and I have a good relationship now. She has realized her own personal mission to help other incarcerated individuals as a Catholic chaplain.

I have real friends in my life for the first time — SGI members whom I met during the Global Family Festival practices, which I had the opportunity to be a part of.

By April 1, 1998, I had already begun to make the external changes necessary to advance in my life. I had left the gang, returned to school and stopped using drugs. However, this was not enough. I still lacked the internal change within my heart, something that is necessary to really change.

Finally I had a realization. I have changed my anger and bitterness into a concern to

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keep others from making the same mistake I made in my life. I appreciate life so much more now. I anticipate the joy of doing gongyo every morning and evening, something I never imagined I would be thankful for. I love to hear about how my mother has also found faith in her life, how my younger cousins are getting good grades in school, and how my girlfriend tries even harder to practice and make something more of her life. I attribute all of this to the one change made in my heart.

I have goals in which to focus my prayer and I have a determination to help people in my community. I would like to help others to realize that they need to change their lives by changing themselves from within, just as I have made a change by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. I feel like I now have a purpose and direction in life.

I still do not know what my mission in life is but I am chanting to know. I still have a long life to live. When I think of the suffering I have brought to my loved ones and myself, I think of Nichiren Daishonin's letter entitled "Happiness in this World." In it he states:

"Never let life's hardships disturb you, after all no one can avoid problems, not even saints or sages.... Suffer what there is to suffer, enjoy what there is to enjoy. Regard both suffering and joy as facts of life and continue chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo no matter what happens" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 161).

This is something I plan to do, no matter what happens.

I am proud to say I have now been an SGI member for seven months. I would like to thank the members of El Rio District for welcoming me in a positive way and for their continued support. I will be chanting always with a deep appreciation for being a part of an organization that has helped me to change my life.

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