





# STRAIGHT

# OUTTA

# GANG LIFE

How the power of Jesus's love delivered a gangster from destruction to grace

BY MONDO DE LA VEGA

**T**he old, Hispanic church building on Wilshire Boulevard was only a few minutes away, but it felt like miles. Walking on the sidewalk nearing the building's parking lot, I began noticing people I'd seen around the neighborhood. All the while, I was on high alert, staying aware of my surroundings at all times, just in case I was being followed.

The area was surrounded by some of the most notorious Los Angeles gangs, who wouldn't think twice about taking a life in front of these people. They did drive-by shootings that sprayed bullets like a fire hose. You've got to understand, drive-by shootings were the norm. They happened almost every day. I had on my bandana,

my Locs, a white shirt, black Dickies and Nike Cortez sneakers. People knew I was a gang member just by the way I was dressed.

It was now nearing 7 p.m. The temperature was mild, not hot or cold, yet I was sweating. Why was I so nervous about some church function? Something unusual was stirring inside me that I couldn't explain.

### It Should Have Been Me

In the end Mom didn't have the heart to throw me out. My mother is the real hero in this story. God was rebuilding her life too as she tried to raise and provide for us. Because of her persistence, work ethic and faith in

God, she became successful in the nursing field. At that time, however, she was worried that her son would be killed or go to prison. She had good reason to be afraid. For me, death seemed to be stalking, watching for the perfect moment to catch me off guard.

One day when I was a teenager, a lowrider with three older homies pulled up for me to hop in. We couldn't have gone two blocks when suddenly, out of nowhere, this chilling uneasiness shot up and down my spine. Fear gripped me as I sensed something was wrong. Just weeks before, one of my best homeboys had died in my arms after being stabbed and shot in a drive-by. And for some reason sitting in that lowrider, I knew I was next. There was a bullet with my name on it.

We were cruising in downtown LA when my pager started vibrating. At that time, pagers were one of the main ways we communicated. When we got a page, we had to stop at the nearest pay phone and call to get our orders.

"Hey, I'm getting a page," I told the homeboy driving. "Pull over at the next pay phone. I need to make this quick call." I knew that if I could take care of this order, they would give me more responsibility, greater access in the hierarchy.

**I BELIEVED THERE WAS A GOD, BUT AT THE SAME TIME, I DIDN'T BELIEVE THERE WAS A GOD.**

The vato who was sitting in the front seat on the passenger side got so frustrated at me he said, "Chale, homie. Let me go take care of the call, fool." I said again, "This is my job, homie. I gotta take care of this, ese." When I said that he exploded with rage. He snatched the pager out of my hand and bolted out of the lowrider toward the pay phone to make the call I was supposed to make.

As soon as he picked up the receiver we felt the explosion of noise as bullets unloaded on him—he dropped to his knees as if moving in slow motion and hit the ground. My boy who was driving put the lowrider in gear and took off.

"What about the homie?" I asked. "We can't just leave that vato like that, homes."

"He's dead, fool. We're not goin' back," came the reply. "Let the dead bury the dead, homie."

Inside, all I could think was, "What happened to the brotherhood?"

### 3 Questions That Changed My Life

My sister, Laura, is one of the greatest people of faith I have ever met. Her dedication to prayer became the center of her life. As I was growing in the gang, she was growing in her faith. My sister was living her own life. She had her own friends. She was focused and strong, smart, studious and beautiful. Guys in the neighborhood around us would call out to her, sweet-talking, trying to pull her in, and she was having none of it. She didn't pay them any attention, which was unusual because every other girl fell into the gang culture.

My grandmother, who had helped us escape from Central America years earlier, had moved to America, too. She started going to a Hispanic church that changed her life. Soon my mother and sister started attending. Not long afterward, Laura sensed the call of God on her life, and she began to develop a profound prayer life. While I was devoting my life to violence and crime, my sister was devoting her life to prayer. Involved in Bible studies, worship meetings and retreat centers, she was experiencing new life. While I was running the streets, my sister was in the prayer closet praying for me.

She was a different person after she found Christ. Her mindset was different. Her desires became different. She was even dressing in a way that spoke to the values she had adopted. Most importantly, though, she began to read and study what most of us were afraid to get into—the Bible. Of course, I believed there was a God, but at the same time, I didn't believe there was a God, if that makes sense. I was

not ignorant to the fact that there was a God, but I didn't believe in Him as I do now. I had faith that God existed, but I didn't want anything to do with Him. At that time, believing in Him meant I would have to change everything about my lifestyle, and I wasn't ready for that.

A lot of Latinos are religious. But in my opinion religious people were hypocrites who manipulated people. There were homies in the street who were sleeping around, doing drugs, committing crimes—you name it. And then on Sunday they were in church trying to be holy. But Laura did not seem like those religious people. At first, I was convinced she had been brainwashed and had fallen into a cult that was using her and manipulating her to give them money. Yet in the middle of all this my sister told me that she and her church were interceding in prayer for me. I had no idea what interceding meant, but my sister began to fast and pray for me. I firmly believe today it was those prayers that were helping save my life.

While Laura was fasting and praying one day, God spoke clearly to her heart that He was going to protect her brother, save her brother and do a work in his heart that would cause him to come to know Jesus. With that word came a strong faith that this would indeed happen. Yet in the natural I was as far away from God as you could get emotionally, physically and spiritually. But based on that word, my sister contended for my life in prayer and asked God to soften my heart.

One day my sister did what many feared to do, and that was to step into my world. She put her reputation on the line and even risked her life. She stepped up to me like no one had ever done. She came to me with tears in her eyes; she was looking at me with compassion, with eyes filled with hope. There was not a sense of judgment in her tone. She simply said, "Mondo, what if God is real? What if prayer works? What if you have a different destiny? God has chosen you and has protected you."

Those three questions would be a catalyst for change in my life. They pierced my soul, disrupted my thinking and got into my DNA. I could not shake those words for the next few weeks. I couldn't sleep well. I couldn't function correctly. "What if God is real? What if prayer works?"

What if you have a different destiny?" It gave me fear because I didn't know what was next. I didn't know if I could accept those thoughts. I didn't know what would happen to me if I accepted them. Where would I go? What would my life look like? I was fearing hope. I was fearing the hope of leaving the gang. I was fearing the hope of living, of believing something different could take place. I had never experienced that kind of fear. I'd had guns pointed at my face. I had been stabbed multiple times. But this fear was foreign and shook me to my core.

Those three questions my sister asked me began to haunt me. I realized how far I had fallen, how filthy and perverted I had become. I realized I had become disenchanted with life. I couldn't see how wounded I was until I stopped long enough to feel another kind of pain. It was the twisting pain of betrayal. The streets had abandoned me with their false love and false promises. I did not know how to heal with so much pain. I felt so much confusion and turmoil inside that I got lost. I could not escape the reality surrounding me. Where would I begin? I felt hopeless. I felt lonely. I felt scared and ashamed.

It's hard to come to the realization that you need God. I needed peace. I needed hope. And I couldn't get that on my own. I needed God.

## Back to the End of the Wild, Wild West

At 7 p.m. that evening I arrived at the Hispanic church on Wilshire Boulevard, I could hear their music. It wasn't normal music I was used to. This sound was faintly familiar, wistfully reminding me of the music I heard years before as a little boy in the church where my mother received her prophetic word. Obviously some sort of celebration was going on.

Inside, the auditorium was jam-packed with about 500 worshippers, and it was hot. I'm still baffled by how these people could be in such physical discomfort and still be so joyful. I thought, "Look at what you guys are wearing. Look at the floors. Look at the chairs, the building." I was judging these people, yet they were so happy and joyful.

I stood all the way in the back, hoping to go unnoticed, and as the music died down, the man I was there to see took the microphone. He was dressed sharply, yet he too looked like a mobster. He had a teardrop tattoo under one eye. His face reflected life on the streets, and I could tell this guy was an OG. His eyes were mysterious, yet they were warm and piercing at the same time. The more I observed him, however, the more I recognized him as a former rival gang member. "What happened?" I asked myself, shocked by how this gang member could go from that to this.

He started by praying, and he talked

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to God as if He was actually listening. He said, "I know I'm supposed to be sharing my story tonight, but there's a young man here who needs to hear the greatest story that has ever been told." I didn't know who he was talking about; I was looking around, wondering, "Who is this young man?" I didn't think it was me.

He wasn't the greatest speaker, but he was real and spoke like one of us. He captured my attention, but the more he spoke, the louder he got and it made me nervous. The question raced through my head "Am I being set up?" I reached over again and felt my guns, two 9-millimeter Berettas. Yet the more this guy spoke, the more drawn in I became.

He began to talk about Jesus and how He suffered and gave His life for me. As the guy was moving around the platform, I gripped my guns so tight my hands started sweating. I was feeling heat, as if the room were boiling hot. I didn't know what was happening to me. I got so captivated with

how this former rival gang member was describing a man named Jesus. He began to talk about mercy and grace. But what got me the most was when he talked about the love Jesus had for me.

If there was ever something that got my attention, it was love. That was something I wished I could have shared with my father, but my definition of love had been so corrupted by the way he had treated my mother, my sister and me. Then it was poisoned worse by what the street had taught me love was.

There was a battle going on inside me between my past and the love this Jesus showed by going to the cross to die for me, for what the speaker called my "sin." It was as if the preacher was looking right through me and realized that all I ever wanted was to be loved and hugged. The preacher's words were reaching the core of my being, and as I realized there was no way he could have known all that was buried deepest inside me, the tears started to fall. For the first time I felt unconditional love, and I couldn't hold in my emotions.

I could not deny the peace I was feeling when there had been nothing but turmoil. As my grip on the guns relaxed, so did the hate that had held my heart. I didn't need the guns to protect me anymore. Something about being loved made me feel protected.

There is power in love. I thought God wanted to punish me, that Jesus wanted to get even. Yet all He wanted to do was tell me I was enough and that I mattered. No feeling from the streets, no feeling from women, no amount of money or respect—no feeling ever compared to the love I was feeling from Jesus at that moment. And it changed everything. ◀

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