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HOW DO YOU LEAVE A GANG?

BY SUZANNE SMALLEY ON 2/6/09 AT 7:00 PM

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The tattoo removal center is called Ya' Stuvo, Spanish slang for "that's enough, I'm done with that." A few times a week, surgeons lend their skills to remove the tattoos with laser surgery. Some gang members have black teardrops, often several of them, tattooed just below the eye. Each one can stand for a stint in prison or a person killed.

Gabriel Hinojos says he got his teardrop from doing time at Folsom State Prison. He grimaced in pain as the surgeon extracted the ink from the soft skin under his eye. Asked what it felt like, Gabriel answered: "You know when you're cooking and the oil hits you? It feels like that, over and over." This is his 45th visit, give or take, to Ya' Stuvo. He is still covered in black ink. There is the name of his gang, Florencia 13 or F13 (one of the largest in Los Angeles), written across his neck in huge block letters and a large black spider ("Spider" is his street name) inked onto

the side of his head. Some tattoos have faded into a faint collection of light gray lines, but they haven't gone away entirely.

Getting out of a street gang in L.A. is about like getting a tattoo removed: slow, painful, scarring. In street lore, a gang banger can never leave a really brutal gang like Mara Salvatrucha 13. In practice, a gang member like Gabriel can get out of a tough, but not suicidally murderous, gang like F13 if he has served time in prison and "done the work"—shown that he can "sling" drugs and wield a gun. But escaping the pull of gang life is extremely difficult, as Gabriel told a NEWSWEEK reporter during recent conversations. Handsome, charismatic—the nurses at Ya' Stuvo could not help flirting with him—Gabriel became a kind of poster child for leaving behind the gang life. He celebrated his achievement by sipping white wine with former first lady Laura Bush at the White House. A few months later, he was back in jail.

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Gabriel joined F13 when he was 14 years old. He had a tough home life, he says, so he moved out and crashed with a gang member named Diablo (since killed). When Gabriel was 16, a girl who was riding on the handlebars of his bike was shot and killed by rival gang members who were aiming for him. He learned to sling (sell) drugs, steal cars and use a gun—"I used to love holding it," he recalls. When he was 21, he was sent away to prison for spraying the house of another gang member with bullets. He was released after only two years, but got two strikes for the incident; one more serious felony conviction and he would be sent to prison for life.

Covered with tattoos when he emerged, he was unemployable. Fearful of winding up back in prison permanently if he rejoined his gang, he wandered into Homeboy Industries, an organization in downtown L.A. that offers GED classes, therapy, substance-abuse counseling, jobs and job training and Ya' Stuvo. A natural leader, Gabriel got a job there. He became a better husband, had another child and moved away from the old neighborhood, Florence. Within a year, he was sent to a Helping America's Youth conference in Washington, D.C., and posed for pictures with the first lady.

But he wasn't free. From time to time, he'd get "G'd up"—crease his pants, iron his shirt and go looking for his old "homeys." (Sharply creased pants are a tribute to old-time Mexican gangsters who wore zoot suits in the '40s and '50s.) In 2006, months after his White House visit, he was back in his old neighborhood, "chilling" with friends, some of whom, he says, were smoking "primos" (crack in marijuana joints). The police arrived. "I hid under the bed," Gabriel recalled. "The cops broke the door down. They got me. I'm like, 'F—! I'm through'." The police