

# Leaving Gangs Behind to Live Parables of Kinship

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By MARY ANN STEINER

**F**r. Gregory Boyle, SJ, founder and executive director of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, can move an audience to tears. He doesn't get that result with the distressing accounts of individuals whose gang activities sank them to harrowing depths. He does it with simple descriptions of how some of those men and women manage to climb rungs of unconditional love to return to their rightful place in the eyes of God.

Homeboy Industries is recognized as the largest gang-intervention program in the country. Serving high-risk, previously gang-involved men and women with free services and programs, Homeboy operates social enterprises that serve as job-training sites. More than 400 homeboys/homegirls take classes that range from parenting to culinary arts, and they learn skills like solar panel installation and silk screening. In addition to services like anger management and job placement, Homeboy provides about 4,000 tattoo-removal sessions a year, erasing from faces, heads, necks and arms the messages and symbols inked at some of the angriest moments of these ex-gang members' lives. More than 10,000 people come to Homeboy each year for one or more services, including classes, tattoo removal, job placement, the 18-month training program and therapy.

Fr. Boyle chronicled the development of Homeboy Industries, and more importantly, told the stories of so many of the young homies he has known and loved, in his 2010 best-selling book, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*. And he tells many of those same stories every year to audiences throughout the country and around the world.

Speaking at the 2016 Catholic Health Assembly, Fr. Boyle, known primarily as "Father G" or

just "G" to his homies, recounted some of those stories — the ones with tragic endings, the ones of redemption against all odds, and the ones that range from wry irony to gut-splitting humor. They all are chapters, he says, in the only story he really knows how to tell: how the violence and desperation of gang life can be mediated only by real opportunities for education and employment, the restoration of relationships, and endless, unquestioning compassion. And how the stories of our lives bring us to the only praise he thinks God has any interest in: "That you all may be one."

A visit to Homeboy Industries in downtown Los Angeles is an immersion experience. My guide was Michael, a recent addition to the Homeboy community. Like all new members, his full-time job is maintenance at Homeboy headquarters, with regular stints of giving tours to visitors.

Michael begins the tour by telling his own story. He was born prematurely to a crack-addicted mother who never even touched him

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Fr. Gregory Boyle, SJ, and some of his associates at Homeboy Industries.

Sal Chavez

before turning him over to emergency care, followed by a foster home. His first foster mother gave him up while he was still a little boy — she couldn't handle him. When he was 11, he joined a gang and pursued several avenues in a nonstop life of crime, resulting in detention homes before he “graduated” to prison. He beat a murder rap. He hasn't been allowed to see his 6-year-old twins for years. And that was as low as he wanted to sink, he decided. His next stop was an appointment with Fr. Boyle.

“He's the father I never had,” Michael says.

Everyone at Homeboy tells his or her story. When asked about the importance of storytelling, Fr. Boyle's eyes shine with purpose. “Telling our stories is how we separate what we've done from who we are,” he says. “Our resumes and rap sheets may include a list of deeds that could curl your grandma's toenails, but that never changes who we are — created by God, instantly forgiven and loved beyond reason.” The stories also build a kinship between the storyteller and the listener. It's harder to hold someone in judgment when, with great vulnerability, they've just laid their sorry past and enormous hope in your lap.

Dorene, who schedules consultation sessions and maintains departmental records, relates how she lost custody of her child as a consequence of addictions and criminal behavior. She spent years justifying her drug use as being her own business, hurting nobody but herself — until she saw her child being led away by a social worker, a likely first step into the kind of life Dorene had been living. She worked hard to clean up her act in order to get her son back. Now she's going to school and holding down a full-time job with more responsibility than she ever could have expected. And she makes sure it's everybody's business that she keeps it that way.

Eddie, a point man in Homeboy's photography and social media, is 16 years clean and loves his job. What came before that was way more than 16 years of gang life, crime, addiction, attempts to change, relapses. Now he records many of the activities that take place in the various Homeboy facilities, including the 8:45 morning meeting at headquarters on Bruno Street. His video of the assembled group includes staff, the day's guests of board members, visitors, occasional media, new applicants hoping to get placed with Homeboy

and the old faithful who are there for their check-in with Father G.

Eddie records the daily reflection, which is one person's account of his or her story and place along the circuitous route of progress. The videos show an efficient meeting, lots of laughter and smiles, more embraces than from all your great aunts at a family reunion, more support than if you slam-dunked the winning basket. No wonder Eddie loves his job.

Homeboy Industries grew out of Dolores Mission Church, the poorest Catholic parish in Los Angeles at the time and the heart of gang activity that festered in the neighborhood's large public housing projects in the mid-1980s. Rather than closing its doors to the "dangerous elements," the parish itself, reeling from too many funerals of young men in opposing gangs, chose to support gang youth with prayers and activities that offered respite and projects that could lead to jobs, while never endorsing the gangs. There were many supporters, but a majority came from the mothers, grandmothers, sisters and daughters who wanted their sons, grandsons, fathers and brothers to stop killing each other. They determined that jobs, not jail, was the answer.

Homeboy Bakery, Fr. Boyle's first foray into private business, was established in 1992 as a way for young men trying to escape their gang roots to learn skills, earn money and feel part of another kind of community. Homegirl Bakery and Café followed in 2007. Today you can buy your Homeboy baked goods at any number of locations, including the Homeboy Diner in LA's City Hall and at Los Angeles International Airport. The Homegirls Café has expanded to catering and a small grocery operation.

Fr. Boyle has been doing the work he loves and seeing the reach of Homeboy Industries extend further into the community for almost 30 years, but he and his homies are aware that he won't be around forever. Succession planning? A polite roll of the eyes and a patient, but patent, explanation. He has been asked this question many times, and he indicates the answer is obvious. It's working, it's all in place, and most importantly, it's in the hands of those who already have walked this walk. There are committed board members, dedicated

donors and an internal organization that has been honed by experience and humility.

Fr. Boyle quotes Mother Teresa: "We're not called to be successful, we are called to be faithful." If you make it at Homeboy, you've got a post-doc in faithful. Fr. Boyle believes that kind of fidelity has a future.

When Fr. Boyle reflected on Fr. Daniel Berrigan, his recently deceased Jesuit brother, he said

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simply, "Dan Berrigan was the reason I went into the Jesuits." They only met once, he said, "but Berrigan shaped so many of our consciences and practices toward nonviolence."

Well, he clarified, at first it was Berrigan, but it was also the great humor and camaraderie he felt among the Jesuits that made him think that was where he belonged. The sense of community at Homeboy — the expressions of affection and support — are akin to what one might experience in a Dominican convent or a Jesuit house, but delivered in the outrageous parlance of "homie-ism."

Like most great storytellers, Fr. Boyle's purpose is first to get our attention and then overturn our expectations of who is dangerous, who is flawed and who rescues whom. His favorite parables, he says, are the ones about losing something very dear and having it restored — a pearl of great price, a lost sheep, a prodigal son. Damaged and wounded, but finding yourself safely back in the flock or the community that loves you, is an important first step, he says. The next step, and all the steps to follow, have to do with "accepting our woundedness, witnessing the wounds of each other and recognizing that the enormous circle of kinship isn't complete until every wounded and beloved one of us is within it."

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