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Turf war stops at the ER

With an understanding of gang life born from his own past, Mike Garcia brings comfort to street combatants and peace to a Boyle Heights hospital.

By Hector Becerra, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
 May 4, 2007

THE call came in just after 10 p.m. on a recent Monday.

"Mike, we got a GSW."

A gunshot wound.

Mike Garcia hopped into his beat-up Mazda and drove to the emergency room at White Memorial Medical Center in Boyle Heights. He joined veteran nurse Eileen Powell beside a man on a gurney who had been shot multiple times at a local park. One of the bullets had shattered his thighbone into jagged halves just above the right knee.

"Do we have any gang affiliation on him?" Powell asked Garcia. "I want to make sure whoever did this is not going to be coming by here to finish the job."

Six years ago, White Memorial Hospital looked for someone who could help the hospital remain safe in a neighborhood where turf was claimed by some of Los Angeles' oldest and most territorial gangs.

A painful moment in the hospital's history had forced officials to prepare for the worst. In the early 1990s, a 19-year-old gang member was brought to the emergency room with a gunshot wound to his head. As more than 30 friends gathered around the entrance, rivals walked up and sprayed shotgun and rifle fire. A pregnant woman inside was wounded.

Some urban hospitals have installed metal detectors or hired armed guards. But at White Memorial, "We decided that if we armed, we would have entered into the combat," said Dr. Brian Johnston, chief of emergency services. "We would have rapidly become the enemy."

In part through Father Gregory Boyle -- founder of Homeboy Industries, a program that tries to wean gang members out of that life -- they heard about Garcia, a self-described "retired" Boyle Heights gangster and two-striker who had spent nearly 20 years of his life in juvenile hall and prison.

Garcia, 61, took on one of the most unusual jobs in the hospital industry.

Since he started at White, he has broken up fights, counseled gang members, separated them, and also comforted those who have been touched by the gangsters' violence.

Like a doctor, Garcia is available 24/7, standing by for pages. But unlike anyone else at the hospital, much of his job is on the streets. He talks to gang members, keeps track of new graffiti and connects with informants who keep him up to date on the latest rivalries.

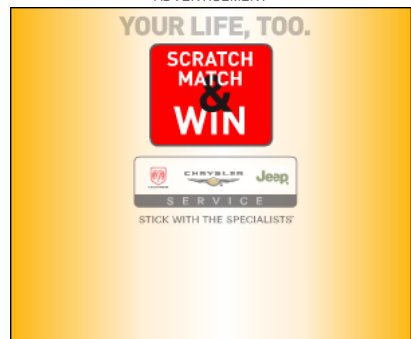
"Mike definitely has made us more secure," Johnston said. "Without Mike, there would be no real way for us to reinforce our role as neutral territory. We would be much more vulnerable."

*

ON that Monday night, the staff decided to page Garcia because the man shot at the park, Arturo Flores, 30, clearly appeared to be a victim of gang violence.

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Behind the curtain, morphine was cutting Flores' pain. A white sheet covered his midsection, and blood pooled beneath his right knee. Flores had a job and a wife, but he'd been hanging out with homeboys when he was shot by rival gang members.

"Just relax, relax. You got your familia outside," Garcia told Flores. "I'll let them in. They're worried about you. You're going to be OK, OK? Don't cry. No, no, no. Just relax."

Flores said it felt like he was going to lose his leg. "My job," he moaned, eyes glimmering with tears.

"Forget about that!" Garcia said. "Thank God you're alive. It could have been your head. It could have been your heart."

"I'm lucky they ran out of bullets," Flores said.

Garcia arched his eyebrows in agreement.

"Thank God for that," Garcia says. "You're going to be OK. You're not paralyzed. You can always get another job. You can always do anything. It's just, your life is more important."

For the next six hours, Garcia kept an eye on visitors and stayed with Flores and his family. He took them to "Mike's Room," so dubbed by staff because he uses it to gather anxious or grieving family members.

Garcia told Flores and his family that he could overcome the wound.

"I've had my leg broke twice, my kneecap came off after a high-speed car chase," he said calmly. "A lot of broken bones. I've been stabbed three times and shot four times."

Four of Garcia's sons are in prison. Two are members of Primera Flats, Garcia's own gang; two others joined the East L.A. Dukes. One, Javier, is doing life for a gang murder.

Garcia remembers how unperturbed he was, so many years ago, when his boys joined gangs.

"I was trying to bring up my kids to be strong, to be survivors," Garcia said. "Not to let anybody tell them nothing."

His own father had been tough, with a brawler's reputation. He had been a pachuco during the zoot suit days of the 1940s. Garcia was only 5 when his father died.

His mother was equally tough. Garcia remembers how she would get into fights with other women in the neighborhood. When he joined Primera Flats at about age 10, his mother was not especially alarmed.

"It wasn't that she was happy I was in a gang," Garcia said. "But she didn't want us to be weak. If you came home crying after a fight, she'd tell you to go back out. She wanted us to be tough."

He grew up in the Aliso Village housing project. Some of his uncles were also gang members. Garcia was nicknamed "Cubano" because some of his homeboys thought his thick hair made him look Cuban.

He was an 18-year-old at Roosevelt High School in Boyle Heights when rivals fired on him and a friend in 1963. Garcia took four bullets, including one to the chest and one to the back. He said he woke up to see a priest giving him last rites at County-USC Medical Center.

In 1984, as he was being released from the state prison in Chino for a 2 1/2 -year robbery stint, he asked to see one of his sons, Robert, who was also doing time there.

As his son watched, a prison guard lit into Garcia for the example he had given his son.

Garcia said it was the first time he had felt ashamed for all that he had done. When he got out, he stayed at a friend's home in Aliso Village. His friend's wife repeatedly urged him to see her pastor.

He finally relented, and the pastor told him he would help him with some legal problems if he entered a three-year recovery program.

Over the course of a year, Garcia became deeply religious. And he found a mission to balance out the many wrongs he had done.

"I was going to help out the neighborhood, the homies," he said. "I wanted to leave an imprint."

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While Garcia comforted the Flores family at the hospital recently, the wounded man's brother asked Garcia why he did his job.

"I have four sons in prison," he said. "My commitment comes from my sons."

At White Memorial, gang members often drop off their wounded, a practice officials call the "Homeboy Ambulance Service." They also bring in ill family members.

On a recent morning, a young man brought in a baby boy with a fever. When security guard Víctor Gamboa noticed the gang tattoo on the young man's bald head, he paged Garcia.

As Garcia walked into the emergency room, the young man was playing with his baby, who was trying to eat a soft taco while sitting on a gurney. The baby, who had Down syndrome, smiled broadly.

The tattoo told Garcia a lot. The young man was a member of one of the East L.A. gangs that reportedly had refused to pay "taxes" to the Mexican Mafia prison gang, prompting the Mafia to greenlight attacks on them.

One young man from the same gang had been shot as he walked out of the hospital. The attack left him paralyzed from the chest down. Another gang member from one of the cliques had been attacked near Soto Street, a few blocks from the hospital. Two rival gang members had tried to cut his gang tattoo from his arm with a knife.

Now Garcia asked a male nurse to bring the gang member over. In a hallway, in lowered tones, Garcia explained the situation.

"You know where you're at," Garcia said matter-of-factly.

"Right," the gang member replied.

"About a year ago, we had a dude that had a big [tattoo of the gang's name] here," Garcia continued, pointing to both shoulders. "And as soon as he walked out of the parking lot ... "

"They shot him and he's paralyzed for life," the gangster finished the sentence. "I know who he is."

Garcia went on.

"It would be great if you would wear a baseball cap."

The gang member said he had one in the car, and said he would wear it.

"You should, homes, just in case," Garcia said gently, then nodded toward the baby. "And it's for his safety too. And your wife. Do it for them."

The young gang member thanked Garcia and shook his hand.

Later, Garcia said there was oil on the tattoo, meaning it was still new. He probably did not want to mess it up with a cap.

*

GARCIA knew not everyone trusted him when he first started working at the hospital. He said he knew there were those waiting for him to mess up.

"But I think that helped keep me on track," Garcia said. "It motivates me. There's people out there who do not like people helping gang members, period. They don't like what I do."

He has a fatherly way with young men -- and makes it a point not to lecture or raise his voice to them.

His hands often shake, the effects of early-onset Parkinson's disease. Young homeboys like to tease him by warning each other: "Don't give Mike a gun."

A few months ago, a gang member came in on crutches to get treatment for an infected foot. He was confronted by two rivals, one of whom was there to get treatment for a broken hand.

A security guard called Garcia, telling him the two sides were exchanging gang signs. The gang member on crutches called his homeboys, and they showed up quickly.

Garcia told the gang member on crutches and his friends that they should leave. He told them he didn't want innocent people to get hurt.

"They left, but I already knew they were probably waiting outside," Garcia said. He told the nurses to take their time treating the injured gang member's broken hand.

After more than an hour, Garcia followed the two gang members to their car and told them to watch out.

The next day, the gang member on crutches returned. He apparently held no grudge against Garcia, who thanked him for "telling your homies not to do anything."

When he was first hired, Garcia said, hospital officials hoped he would not only keep the peace but also counsel patients about getting out of the gang life.

But Garcia refused to do that. Lecturing gang members, telling them they were doing wrong, wasn't going to work, he said.

"They've heard that all their life. They know they're doing wrong; they're not stupid," Garcia said. "Sometimes, you just have to let them know someone cares. A lot of people don't want anything to do with these guys. I just try to be there, to show them that someone does care."

Sometimes, simply lending an ear can make a difference.

That was the case in February, when a young man who'd been shot in the stomach was wheeled into the ER. Baby-faced, with a shaved head, he grunted in pain under an oxygen mask.

Marta Gonzalez, the man's 21-year-old sister, arrived with distraught family members and friends.

Garcia led relatives in prayer over their loved one. A brother awkwardly held Garcia's hand. The family seemed tepid toward Garcia. They were tense, quiet.

"I thought, 'Who is that guy?'" Gonzalez said of Garcia. "Later that night, while my brother was in surgery, I told my dad, 'I think he's a veterano (veteran gang member) or something.'"

Garcia stayed with them all night, late into the morning, until the young man got out of surgery.

Over the next month, he went into surgery three more times. Gonzalez said Garcia became a fixture, keeping in touch with her and her family almost every day.

She said he stood over her brother's bed and talked to him when he was conscious.

When she voiced her concerns about her brother's treatment, Garcia got her in touch with the right people.

The young man could not be saved.

"As soon as he coded, we called Mike," said Powell, the veteran nursing supervisor on duty. "They trusted him."

Garcia stayed for hours in the room with the family and the body and kept in touch with Gonzalez in the days leading up to the funeral.

"There were days when I called Mike on Sunday, while he was at church, and he would call back," Gonzalez said. "Mike cared. You could tell. I bugged him a lot, but he never gave me an attitude."

*

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