

FRANCES SANDOVAL:FOUNDER OF MOTHERS AGAINST GANGS

Written by June Grayson

Photographed by Richard Grayson

"Mothers have to get tough with gangs," Frances Sandoval says. "As mothers who have lost children to gang violence, we must join together to eradicate gangs from our neighborhoods and

give our children the right to live full and fruitful lives."

You notice first how small she is - and how gentle. You have to listen carefully because she speaks so softly. She smiles. She laughs. She stops to hug a friend - a mother whose son was also a victim of gang violence.

She is beautiful - not only physical beauty, though she has that too - but the radiant beauty of someone who cares passionately about others and never tires of serving them. She makes you believe again that the old religious virtues still operate in our world today. She proves that one person can, indeed, make a difference.

Who is Frances Sandoval and why is she the way she is?

Perhaps you have already heard some of the story.

Sandoval, a young Hispanic mother, formed Mothers Against Gangs in 1986 after her 15 year old son was brutally murdered in broad daylight in front of a Chicago school.

Her subsequent struggle for justice sensitized her to the plight of other mothers who had lost children to gang violence. The killer, a Chicago gang member, was caught when Sandoval went on local television and offered a \$1,000 reward. He is now

serving a 35-year sentence for the crime.

"I was lucky, though," Sandoval explains. "I knew my legal rights and I was determined not to give up until Arthur's killer was found and brought to justice."

Sandoval quit high school to get married and have three children. After her divorce, she returned to school to get her general equivalency degree, study communications in college, and go on to do community work. She knew her way around Chicago's neighborhoods. You might almost think that fate was preparing her for her subsequent tasks.

"In the midst of my own suffering, I met all of these other suffering mothers who had no one to tell them their rights and help them after their children became gang victims.

"I had heard about MADD, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, and I thought - there is no difference, our children are victims too."

With donated legal help and a grant from a neighborhood organization, Sandoval organized Mothers Against Gangs by modeling its charter and bylaws on those of MADD. "Our goal is not to assess blame, but to help stem this senseless violence before more of our children are destroyed," Sandoval says.

MAG activities consist of community education, support services to mothers who have lost children to gang violence as well as mothers who have children in gangs, and advocacy through the legal system.

Sandoval is proud that MAG helped in the successful campaign for the passage of the Illinois Safe School Zone Act, the law that permits juveniles to be tried as adults if they're charged with drug trafficking or using weapons in a school or within 1,000 feet of a school.

In 1986 The Christian Science Monitor published a long news story about Sandoval. Other papers and wire services picked it up. Last year the Chicago Tribune published a twelve page story in its Sunday Magazine section about her and the work of Mothers Against Gangs.

This year, Nancy de los Santos, a film producer, plans to make a television movie for CBS on location in Chicago. Rita Moreno will play the role of Sandoval. Sandoval retains consulting rights.

MAG now has 1,000 members in Chicago and two more chapters in Illinois - one in Aurora and one in Sterling-Rock Falls. Gang activity is increasing in suburban areas. There is no place to

hide.

People in other states may form their own organizations of Mothers Against Gangs. There have been spin-offs even in Chicago - Neighbors Against Gangs and Parents Against Gangs. Other communities invite Sandoval to speak at their organizational meetings. She has been invited to speak in Florida, which also seeks to reduce its gang problems.

MAG is not the first community organization to address the problem of gang violence. According to Sister Leticia, also an Hispanic and the coordinator of SEA - Soledad Enrichment Action - this organization has existed for sixteen years and has grown to five locations in the Los Angeles area. They seek to educate, empower, and enable concerned parents help their children resist gang membership. According to the Los Angeles Times, law-enforcement officials say these groups have helped to reduce gang violence in East Los Angeles.

Sandoval credits the success of MAG to the power of the word mother. "Every one has a mother, right? Even gang members. And most kids love their mothers. When mothers learn how to assume their responsibilities, using tough love, and even kicking their kids out of the house if necessary, they find out that they have

more power than they ever realized."

Are organizations such as MAG really effective or are we just engaging in wishful thinking? Newspaper headlines say that the drug problems will get worse before they get better.

Governments allot ever more money to law enforcement and drug control. Civilization is fragile, guns abound, and life is cheap.

According to Angelo De Marco, member of the Illinois State Police and supervisor of the North Central Illinois Narcotic Task Force, "I know of only one country in the world today that has made a dent in the drug problem. In Malaysia, anyone caught dealing drugs is immediately hung.

"Our judicial system today is overburdened," continues De Marco, "so you have plea bargaining and negotiations. The punishment no longer fits the crime. The police can only do so much.

"Yet anything not part of the problem has to be part of the solution. So MAG has to be effective. When you don't have money or power, you have to have people. And people is what organizations such as MAG can provide," De Marco says.

"What do politicians want? They want to be re-elected. How do you think a judge will act when he faces 500 grim and determined mothers? Our political system will respond to

community involvement when it has to, it is just a function of time."

Dr. Felix Padilla, professor of sociology at De Paul University and Director of the Center for Hispanic Research, is studying Chicago street gangs and the relationship between gangs and drug dealing. He says that he is collecting data and will not be able to reach any conclusions or make recommendations for two to four years. However, he makes the following preliminary observations.

"The increase in street gangs, the drug dealings, and the increased violence may all be related to a new economic phenomenon: the shutting out of our ghetto youth from the labor market. Always before in our country's history, the lowly and dispossessed have been able to work themselves up the economic ladder and out into the mainstream of society. We are observing the real downward mobility of the working class. The disappearance of factory and laboring jobs has left millions of previously hard-working Americans permanently unemployed. People have lost the jobs that gave their lives dignity and meaning and that enabled them to raise a family.

"My father did well in his job," continues Padilla. "He drove a delivery truck to O'Hare Airport for twenty years. I

told that to a gang member I interviewed. He said - there are no jobs like that for us anymore.

"These kids aren't dumb. They know that in many cases there is nothing out there for them. In that respect, the gangs function as an alternative employer and underground economy."

Is there any hope that the situation will change? "If we can put people into outer space, we ought to be able to think of work that needs to be done here," Padilla answers.

According to Dr. Richard Martin, head of the department of criminal justice at Aurora University, Aurora, some gang members escape the gangs even today. "They make it out through athletic ability or they were lucky enough to have a high school counselor who cared about them. They tell me that they are able to return to their old neighborhoods to visit and the gangs don't bother them. They feel that they have earned some respect from their former gang brothers because they were able to get out. Of course, there is no place for them in their old neighborhoods."

Thousands of children all over America have been the victims of gang violence. Thousands of mothers have wept and are still weeping bitter tears. How was Sandoval able to transmute her personal pain into constructive action?

"If my children had not been there for me, if my family had not been there for me," explains Sandoval, "there would be no Frances Sandoval today and no Mothers Against Gangs.

"Many Hispanic women have no support. I was fortunate. I also had my priest who was my psychologist, my psychiatrist, my everything. One has to deal with the unbearable pain and the overwhelming guilt.

"People have to understand that gang violence is not just simple manslaughter and murder. It is the destruction of entire families and terrorism against the entire community - indeed against the entire country.

"I remember so clearly how it was before Arthur was murdered. My three children would sit on the front steps and wait for my car to drive up. Then they would come running to meet me and I would smile.

"Three months after Arthur's murder, I pulled up and parked my car. My other son, who was then ten years old, came running out and he said - oh, Mommy, you are smiling, you haven't smiled at me since Arthur died! And I thought - oh, my God, I have deprived my son, who is also hurting and missing his brother, of even his mother's smile.

"When you know in your heart you are right, you have to
fight for what needs to be done. It is that simple."

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