

FRANCES SANDOVAL:FOUNDER OF MOTHERS AGAINST GANGS

Written by June Grayson

Photographed by Richard Grayson

You notice first how small she is and how gentle. She moves easily among the adoring crowd. She stops to embrace a friend, a mother whose son was also a victim of gang violence.

She is beautiful - not only physical beauty although she has that too - but the inner glow of someone who cares passionately about others and never tires of serving them.

She is here in February, 1989, to present the awards at the first anniversary dinner meeting of the Aurora, Illinois, chapter of Mothers Against Gangs. Meet Frances Sandoval, the founder of Mothers Against Gangs, and the leader of this new grass-roots movement that some people say has already broken the power of gangs in their communities.

Sandoval, born in Chicago of Mexican parents, founded Mothers Against Gangs in 1986 after a Chicago gang member killed her 15 year old son. On January 23, 1985, Arthur Sandoval, who was not a gang member, and a friend found the friend's younger sister talking to gang members on school grounds. A fight began when she attempted to leave the gang and go with her brother and Arthur. Other gang members egged on the actual killer, an illegal Mexican immigrant. "Go stab him, stab him," they yelled. Arthur bled to death on the school lawn.

Even though gang members identified the killer, the police did not arrest him and he went into hiding. It was not until Sandoval went on a local radio station and offered a \$1,000 reward that another informant came forward.

Sandoval was in court twelve times before the killer was finally convicted. Now he is serving a 35 year sentence for

murder.

"I was lucky," Sandoval explains. "I knew my legal rights and I would not give up until Arthur's killer was brought to justice." Her prolonged and painful struggle sensitized her to the plight of other Chicago mothers who had lost children to gang violence.

"When you are a victim of gang violence in Chicago," says Jesse Gonzales, the executive director of the Chicago office of Mothers Against Gangs, "you may not even understand English. You don't know what the law is and you have to go to court. The police may insinuate that your son or daughter was involved with the gangs and deserved the attack. This is not always the case. Innocent people do suffer."

Sandoval had heard about MADD, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, and she thought - what's the difference, gangs are killing our children just like drunken drivers do.

With the donated services of Antonio Curiel, a Chicago lawyer and former federal prosecutor, and a \$4,700 grant from the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, Sandoval organized Mothers Against Gangs (MAG) as a nonprofit Illinois corporation. "We will do everything possible to stop this senseless violence before more of our children are destroyed," Sandoval says.

Sandoval is proud that she successfully campaigned for the enactment of the Illinois Safe School Zone Act. This law permits juveniles to be tried as adults if they are charged with drug trafficking or using weapons in a school or within 1,000 feet of a school.

MAG offers community education, support services to mothers who have lost children to gang violence and to mothers who have children in gangs, and advocacy through the legal system.

"MAG members will meet with afflicted families, support them emotionally, and explain that they have the right to demand that the law be responsive to their needs," Jesse Gonzales explains.

"We will go into court with them, translate for them, and provide community pressure when necessary to make our judicial system fulfill its legal obligations."

Sandoval had dropped out of high school to marry and have three children. After her divorce eight years later she returned to school to earn her general equivalency degree and study speech and communications at Chicago's Loop College. Later she worked as a data processor, Spanish language newspaper employee, court interpreter, and intercessor for indigents through the Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago. Now she is administrative

assistant to Juan Soliz, Chicago alderman of the 25th Ward, who fully supports her MAG activities.

MAG has over 1,000 members in Chicago and two more chapters in Illinois - one in Aurora and one in Sterling. Any Illinois community may affiliate with MAG under the same state charter. Chicago also has unaffiliated spin-offs: Neighbors Against Gangs and Parents Against Gangs.

Groups who want to organize in other states must adopt their own state charter, as has Hollywood, Florida. After a local Miami radio station interviewed Sandoval in 1987, Marian Cortes, a Hollywood mother concerned about gangs in her community, visited Sandoval to learn about MAG. She returned to Florida to organize Hollywood's Neighbors Against Gangs. Sandoval will speak at a special meeting there later this spring.

Jane Fonda Productions plans a television drama in which Rita Moreno will play the part of Sandoval. Script writers have interviewed Sandoval. Sandoval retains consulting rights.

MAG is not the first community organization to address the problem of gang violence. Concerned Parents of the Soledad Enrichment Action (SEA) first met sixteen years ago and has grown to five locations in the Los Angeles area. They educate, empower, and enable other parents help their children resist gang

membership.

MAG trains mothers how to focus their awesome power.

Sandoval believes that MAG derives authority from the word mother.

"Everyone has a mother, right? Even gang members. Most kids idolize their mothers. When mothers learn how to shoulder responsibilities, using tough love, and even kicking kids out of the house if necessary, they discover they are no longer powerless," Sandoval says.

MAG insists that parents must cut off children who defiantly stay in gangs. "We tell parents to get gang kids out of the house. Don't feed them, don't do their laundry, just tell them to go back on the streets," says Judith Maves, current president of the Aurora MAG chapter.

"MAG lets the police and courts know that we are aware, and maybe they work harder for us," observes Avis Miller, immediate past president of Aurora MAG. "We teach our parents, who don't always understand our political system, that the police are not the enemy. We have to supervise our children and not believe everything they tell us."

According to Aurora Police Chief Robert Brent, "MAG is an

excellent group, they have accomplished a lot in spite of limited resources, and we fully support them. My officers tell me that gang recruitment is falling off and that some peripheral gang members may want to leave the gangs. MAG has told our community how destructive gangs are."

Chief Brent believes that even some hard-core gang members can be weaned from gangs if encouraged by family, friends, teachers, and community organizations such as MAG. "Gangs don't take this lightly. They threaten and the kids are afraid. Yet some kids have escaped the gangs without incident."

Residents of Sterling, Illinois, population 16,000, would not believe that their country town 200 miles west of Chicago could have a gang problem. The police and city administration established a gang task force in 1987. According to Officer Robert Honegger of the Sterling police, "The earlier that a community can recognize the problem and work together to solve it, the more effective they can be. Mrs. Sandoval came out here two times. She motivated our parents to get involved and support the police task force. The parents were able to show their kids that gang membership was a dead end."

You don't need to start with a big membership to turn your community around. Rebecca Herrera, Sterling community leader and

first president of the Sterling MAG chapter organized in 1988, says, "Our MAG unit has eight to ten women who do most of the work, but almost everyone supports our activities. They give time and money, act as chaperons, and help us paint over graffiti. We saw results right away. We let everyone know that we would not give up our children to gangs. We start with the 5th and 6th graders, because the gangs recruit members first in junior high. If we can protect our kids until they get in high school, they can do something constructive with their lives."

Gang problems in big cities such as Chicago seem insolvable. Chicago has had gangs for forty years. The Chicago Police Department Gangs Crime Unit estimates that more than 125 gangs with 12,000 members operate in the city. Like an infectious disease, gangs spread to Chicago's "collar" cities, such as Aurora, in the early 1980s and to the countryside by 1985.

Dr. Felix Padilla, of Puerto Rican heritage, is professor of sociology and director of the Center for Hispanic Research at DePaul University, Chicago. He says, "The increase in street gangs, drugs, and violence may all relate to a new economic phenomenon: the shutting out of our ghetto youth from the labor market. The disappearance of factory and laboring jobs left

millions of previously hard-working Americans permanently unemployed. Gangs function as an alternative employer and underground economy."

Some gang members can escape the gangs even today and go to college. "They have athletic ability or they were lucky enough to have a caring high school counselor," says Dr. Richard Martin, head of the department of criminal justice at Aurora University.

"It is not against the law to belong to a gang," Sandoval says. "Chicago has always had gangs, but the wanton killing did not begin until the 1960s. An over concern for juvenile rights sent a wrong message to the gangs. They knew that they could lie and get away with anything in our courts. Only two to ten for someone's life and then they were back on the streets. Now the word is out - be careful, you kill a bystander and that means 35 years."

Sandoval believes in the death penalty for the most heinous of gang crimes. "The time is ripe for a signal from our courts that our communities will no longer tolerate this behavior. The judges should have no alternate but to invoke the death penalty for the most unspeakable crimes. People have to understand that gang violence is not just casual arson and manslaughter. It is the destruction of entire families. It is terrorism against the

whole community. It could be the obliteration of our civilization."

Angelo De Marco, supervisor of the North Central Illinois Narcotic Task Force, says, "Only one country in the world today has made a dent in the drug problem. In Malaysia, they immediately hang anyone caught dealing drugs. Our judicial system is so overburdened that the punishment no longer fits the crime. Our political system will eventually have to respond to grass-roots community organizations such as MAG, it is just a question of time."

Thousands of children all over America are victims of gang violence. Thousands of mothers weep bitter tears. Frances Sandoval transformed her personal pain into constructive action.

"When you know in your heart you are right, you have to fight for what needs to be done, no matter what the cost. It is that simple," Sandoval says.

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

"I remember how it was before Arthur died. My three children would wait outside for my car. Then they would come running to meet me and I would smile.

"Three months after the murder, I pulled into my driveway.

My other son, only ten years old, came running out. He said -
oh, Mommy, you are smiling and you haven't smiled at me since
Arthur died. I thought - oh, my God, I have deprived my son, who
is also hurting and missing his brother, of even his mother's
smile.

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