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BOOK SHEDS LIGHT ON LATINAS IN GANG LIFE

CSUSM professor shares women's stories — and exit strategies — in 'Transcending Gangs'

By TAWNY Maya McCRAY U-T 12:01 A.M. MARCH 30, 2013 Updated 4:24 P.M. MARCH 29, 2013

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Cal State San Marcos professor Liliana Castañeda Rossmann immersed herself in the lives of Latina gang members to discover how they could free themselves of the dangerous lifestyle.

Rossmann, 50, a communications professor at the college since 1998, interviewed 25 women and girls with gang ties and shared their stories in her book "Transcending Gangs," released last October.

Most of the women, who ranged in age from about 14 to 50, live in San Jose, where Rossmann lives and serves as a member of the city's gang prevention task force. One woman was from Vista.

"Very little is known about women in gangs, specifically Latinas," Rossmann said in a recent phone interview. "The way society looks at it — men, OK, yeah, you expect them to be violent — but whenever women do that, you go, 'Wait, why are they doing something like this — something that is so unladylike and unfeminine?' We have this notion in society that girls shouldn't do things like this."

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Rossmann classified the women into three groups: gang impacted, meaning girls who lived in neighborhoods affected by gangs or whose boyfriends were gang members; active gang members; and girls who managed to remove themselves from the lifestyle.

Rossmann said many of the girls in the book belonged to gangs because they had a history of family violence and were physically or sexually abused.

“One woman said, ‘My parents taught us how to fight. They said, “You’re going to fight, you’re going to encounter that because we’re in a gang, so you’re going to be targeted, so you better learn how to fight,”” Rossmann said.

Along with family violence, chapters in the book discuss tattoos and identity, gang colors and names, jail time, motherhood and loyalty, respect and betrayal.

The book concludes with a “De-Gang-ification Manual” outlining possibilities for action and recommendations for families and academics to enhance resources now available.

Rossmann draws on an eclectic array of approaches to envision what girls’ lives can be like despite the presence of gangs. She writes about how San Jose is employing new strategies for community members to reclaim their neighborhoods while also influencing gang members to choose something better for themselves.

She also suggests that cities support the creation of community gardens and cooperative markets.

Rossmann said that to escape a gang, girls can take a series of steps.

“It’s not one single thing that causes their exit; it’s several things together,” she said. “They start to create a story about how the gang isn’t really serving their purposes. One of the pieces that is instrumental in their exit from the gang is religion.”

Rossmann said many of the women she interviewed who got out credited the international church Victory Outreach.

She said the woman from Vista — who came from a violent family with an alcoholic dad — changed her ways after she took a summer job at a flea market and caught somebody trying to shoplift.

“She became a local hero,” Rossmann said, adding that around that time the

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woman’s father also had a heart attack and started attending church, which helped the parents’ relationship and improved the family dynamic.


She said she hopes the book will spark more dialogue about what can be done to help gang members while encouraging communities to take a socially conscious approach to reclaiming their neighborhoods.


“This is a complex problem,” she said. “Locking them up and throwing away the key isn’t the best approach, but it’s the only approach we know. They require a compassionate approach.”




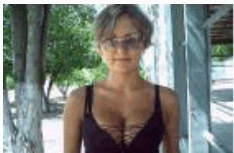
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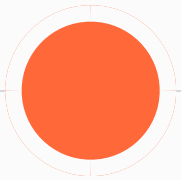

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