



TRANSCENDING GANGS

Dr. Liliana Castañeda Rossmann's latest book shares insights into the little studied world of Latina gang members

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In her new book, Dr. Liliana Castañeda Rossmann, professor of communication at CSUSM, shares insights into the little studied world of Latina gang members. In *Transcending Gangs*, published by Hampton Press, she asks how gang involved or impacted girls can manage to break free from the grip of gangs.

For her research Rossmann interviewed 25 women with ties to the gang lifestyle. In *Transcending Gangs* she details their intimate conversations and shares how the practice of storytelling allows them a way to disinhabit the gang, crafting new identities that acknowledge their past while creating a positive future.

"Most of us think of gangs as negative," said Rossmann, "but for these girls and women they provided a sense of community and belonging – a sense of accomplishment. They were offered unconditional acceptance that they had never received before.

"Many of the women and girls I talked to belonged to gangs because they believed they were 'nothing.' I was surprised to learn how much trauma they experienced in their lives. These were lost children with no one looking after them. They were victims of physical abuse and sexual abuse. They weren't going to school or if they were, the schools they attended didn't have enough resources. The constant theme in our conversations was that the women who got out did so because they could manifest a new identity for themselves and they wanted to tell their story in order to keep other girls from following in their footsteps."

Unfortunately, once a girl or woman decides she wants to give up her membership in a gang, it's not a simple matter of just disassociating. Departure rituals such as being "jumped out" or beaten up are demotivating factors.

"It's crucial that they learn how to tell their own story with a different ending," commented Rossmann. "They had to fill the void that said that they were 'nothing' and believe that they were 'something.' Often this is done through a spiritual epiphany or when they become mothers, experience a betrayal or go to jail."

Chapters in *Transcending Gangs* touch on family violence, tattoos and identity, gang colors and names, la vida loca, jail time, motherhood (or, as Rossmann calls it "the mother'hood"), loyalty and respect and betrayal. The book concludes with a "De-Gang-ification Manual," outlining possibilities for action and recommendations for families, practitioners and academics to enhance resources currently available. Rossmann draws on an eclectic array of approaches to envision what girls' lives could be like despite the presence of gangs.

And for those who think that San Diego's North County is

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untouched from gangs, Rossmann urges that it's time to think again. In fact, KPBS reported in 2010 that the suburban region has nearly 30 documented gangs.

"There is definitely a gang presence here in North County," said Rossmann. "Whenever you have multitudes of marginalized people there will be illegal activities – sometimes it's the only way for them to eat."

As a resident of San José and a member of that city's Mayor's Gang Prevention Task Force, Rossmann shared how the metropolis is employing new strategies to empower community members to reclaim their gang impacted neighborhoods while also influencing gang members to choose something better for themselves.

On page 284 of *Transcending Gangs*, Rossmann highlights San José's successful graffiti and tattoo removal programs. She also suggests how powerful it would be to support the creation and maintenance of community gardens and cooperative markets, similar to those found in Mexico and Latin America, which would sell locally grown produce. Rossmann argues that these social endeavors should not be limited only to more affluent areas.

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"We need to approach this in a more humane way, a way that engages the entire community," said Rossmann, returning to the important theme of storytelling in the book. "We need to give gang members a happy ending – a way of envisioning a future where they are successful."

About Liliana Castañeda Rossmann

Rossmann earned an M.A. in International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, and a Ph.D. in Communication from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Her research and teaching interests include storytelling by Mexican migrants, especially as it pertains to the social construction of identity; communication theory; language and social interaction; interpersonal and intercultural communication; and conflict, mediation and dialogue. She is a native of México and now lives in San José, California, with her husband Walter and their children Maximilian and Emilia.

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