



Joe Malena

Lucrecia Rosendo, the mother of a 13-year-old who was arrested for gang-related activity, speaks to an interfaith group about the warning signs of gang culture.

EAST PALO ALTO

A call to action to fight gang activity

Parents, schools urged to come together to tackle simmering problem

by Vicky Anning

When Lucrecia Rosendo found out her 13-year-old son had been arrested for painting gang graffiti at his East Palo Alto school, she was distraught. He had never been in trouble with the police before, she said. He was always so quiet.

Recounting that day in February still reduces the mother of three to tears, but the realization that her son was falling into bad company has changed Rosendo's life and her relationship with her

sons. She decided to give up her job of 10 years and instead focus on raising her boys, ages 14, 13 and 5.

Last week, Rosendo was one of a dozen other parents and members of an 18-church interfaith group who launched a call to action to other families, warning them of a simmering gang problem in East Palo Alto schools. While the problem has not reached epidemic proportions, they said, it needs to be nipped in the bud now,

before it escalates out of control.

"I'm a mother who represents all other mothers," said P cheeks, tears streaming from her eyes, at a meeting of 200 parents in the auditorium of Edison McNair Academy. "What happened to me could happen to you."

More than 390 youths between the ages of 13 and 25 belong to eight different gangs in East Palo Alto, according to estimates from the San Mateo County Sheriff's

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East Palo Alto Police Chief Wes Bowling (left), East Palo Alto City Councilwoman Pat Foster and Edison McNair Academy Principal Robert Morganstein listen to comments at a meeting last week where parents were warned of a "simmering" gang problem.

Call to action

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Department. The gangs are both Hispanic and African-American, but most of the activity is among Latino gangs—the Norteños and the Sureños, law enforcement sources say. There has also been an increase in girl gang activity. Children as young as 10 have been identified by the East Palo Alto Police Department as gang members, Police Chief Wes Bowling told parents at the May 12 meeting.

There are a greater number of "gang wannabes" among the 5,300 children in East Palo Alto's school district, which only teaches through eighth grade. Not quite old enough to be fully fledged gang members, these younger children think it's cool to imitate older family members by wearing gang-style clothing, according to the Police Department's youth program coordinator, Irving Godinez. This can be a prelude to more serious gang involvement, he said.

Some aspiring gang members start to get into trouble for painting graffiti, committing minor acts of vandalism or fighting one another. There may also be some experimentation with drugs and alcohol, Godinez said.

"We're noticing a fad of gangs between sixth and eighth grade," he said. "We've heard that it's cool to be part of a clique or part of a gang."

Only a small minority of East Palo Alto's youth become full-fledged gang members. And even then it is generally children in the eighth grade and higher who are "jumped"—a gang initiation ceremony that involves being beaten up by a group of others, according to statistics from the San Mateo County Sheriff's Department. But once they join a gang, children may start to get into more serious trouble with the law—for selling drugs, for example, or dealing with stolen property, Godinez said.

"The problem is simmering," Godinez said. "It is there and we need to address it now. It grows like a brush fire, and it needs to be put out." Organizers of last week's meeting—a federation of Peninsula churches called Peninsula Interfaith Action that aims to improve the quality of life in the area—felt East Palo Alto parents needed a wake-up call to get involved with their kids, before it's too late. City and school officials endorsed that view last week.

"Do I think I have gangs in my

school? Yes. Can I prove it? No," Edison McNair Principal Robert Morganstein told parents. "But I'll tell you one thing: If they don't get involved, they'll prove it to you."

"I have kids that are ready to go over," he said. "They're looking for something to do."

McNair has a zero-tolerance policy toward any kind of gang activity on the school campus, including graffiti and gang-style clothes, Morganstein said. The school also offers a raft of different after-school activities—from study assistance to sports—to help keep youth off the streets once school is out.

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East Palo Alto Police Department
youth program coordinator

Some parents told school officials at the meeting that they wanted more after-school activities, but Brenda Bias, director of the Ravenswood district's after-school program, said there are already plenty of activities to choose from, if parents only cared to learn about them. The Police Department has counted more than 50 after-school programs in East Palo Alto.

"There is a lot going on after school, and if you don't know that, you need to go to your schools and find out," Bias said. Costaño School Principal Marthelia Hargrove said in a telephone interview that after-school activities are key to steering children away from trouble when they are at their most vulnerable age.

"We do have a tough job competing with peer pressure in the after-school environment," she said. "We have very few fights here, but we're trying to help kids to boost their self-esteem. That's the problem that gets them involved with gangs."

Rosendo's eldest son, who attends Costaño, said before the meeting that he faces continual pressure from his friends to join gangs, but so far he has resisted.

"Kids always tell me to get into gangs," said the broad-chested 14-year-old, who declined to give his

name for fear of retaliation. "I tell my friends, 'I don't want to get into a gang, because once you get into a gang, you've got a problem. If you want to get out, they kill you with guns.' I decided in my head not to get involved with Norteños or Sureños."

The 14-year-old warned his younger brother of the danger of gangs before the 13-year-old got into trouble with the police earlier this year for spraying graffiti. He noticed his younger brother had started to paint his hands with gang graffiti. But his mother did not find out until she learned that her son had been led out of Edison McNair school in handcuffs.

If she had been more involved with her boys before, Rosendo says in halting English, she might have noticed in her middle son's behavior the warning signs of a gang wannabe—the colored sweaters and the baseball caps. But she was too busy at her janitorial job, where she worked for 10 years after she and her husband moved to East Palo Alto from Mexico.

"Now my job is to take care of my kids," she said, after giving up work in February.

Youth program coordinator Godinez says a supportive family and school environment is crucial to steering children like Rosendo's sons away from gangs. So many children are being raised by working parents who have no time to find out what is going on with their sons and daughters.

If parents notice any evidence that their children are becoming involved with gangs, they should contact their schools immediately for advice, Godinez said. Telltale signs include: red or blue clothing (red for Norteños, blue for Sureños); sagging (wearing pants that ride low on the hips); big jackets and a baseball cap pushed to the side, rather than the back; wearing a shirt buttoned to the top; or "tagging"—painting gang graffiti on walls or on hands (the number 4 or the symbol XIV is typical for Norteños; the number 3 or X3 is typical for Sureños).

Police Chief Bowling also had some words of advice for parents at last week's meeting: "Know what your kids are thinking. Provide proper care and supervision for your child. Listen to your kids; don't just talk to them. They'll tell you what's going on in their lives." ■