



## Street Roots News: Youths and the gang life: Their stories, in their words

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*Young adults doing time for gang violence talk about their paths and what might prevent other kids from following in their footsteps*

Portland is about to enter a second consecutive summer filled with what’s predicted to be a record-breaking level of gang shootings, homicides and violence.

The gunmen are getting younger and younger, and the violence increasingly senseless, according to those who work with current and formerly incarcerated gang members in the Portland-metro area.

Media reports related to gang violence often highlight the perspectives of victims’ families, the police and those trying to find a pathway to the end of a problem that’s only been ramping up in recent years, with each shooting making way for retaliation.

The perspective of those who pull the trigger is seldom explored.

Who are they? What happened to them before they found themselves with a weapon in hand, not caring about the consequences of taking another human being’s life?

Street Roots sat down with young adults serving lengthy sentences in Oregon Youth Authority correctional facilities, for crimes ranging from armed robbery to murder, and asked them these questions. All the youths are either gang members or deeply gang-involved.

It is not our intention to glamorize this violence, to ignore the victims and their grieving families, or to excuse the actions taken by the perpetrators interviewed for this story. It is simply an attempt to understand how they got here, and what could have been done to stop it.



*Luis is a gang-involved youth serving a five-year, 10-month sentence for an armed robbery he committed when he was 16 years old. Trei, a Gangster Disciple, is serving a 90-month sentence for stabbing a man in the chest during a robbery. Photo by Joe Glode*

These are their stories, in their words.

### ON CHILDHOOD

#### **Luis, 23**

*We met with Luis at MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility in Woodburn, where he is serving a five-year, 10-month sentence for second-degree armed robbery. Luis is not his real name. Luis’ parents and many of his older relatives were gang members, but he said he never officially joined a gang himself.*

*“I was born at OHSU hospital, on the hill. I have a young mom. She was 15 when she had me. She moved to California, so my grandma raised me.”*

*Luis's grandmother was first-generation American of Mexican descent. He said living with her had its ups and downs.*

"She was old school – I mean not like strict, but she tried to give me the best life she could, and I respect her for it, but it just wasn't for me.

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*I grew up fast. Just because of the environment I was in family-wise. My dad went to prison when I was 6, and a lot of my uncles and everyone got locked up when I was young, for gang stuff.*

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"She's a woman, not a male figure, but I figured it out. I grew up fast. Just because of the environment I was in family-wise. My dad went to prison when I was 6, and a lot of my uncles and everyone got locked up when I was young, for gang stuff."

*Luis said he looked up to an uncle who was in his life until he was about 9 years old, but now that uncle is serving a 21-year prison sentence.*

*Luis was moved around frequently throughout his childhood. Sometimes he stayed with his mother after she moved back from California, other times, with his aunt, but usually his grandmother. He often switched schools either because he moved or because he was expelled for fighting. It wasn't until after he was incarcerated that he took any interest in school.*

*When Luis was in fifth grade, his dad got out of prison, and he went to live with him for a couple of years.*

"He was in and out of prison a lot. He's from California, South Central and San Fernando Valley.

"Growing up, my dad would tell me, 'You got to be a man. You gotta do stuff on your own. You can't depend on grandma.' I looked up to him, so I thought, 'Yeah, you're right.' Anything he said I took to heart. It was my dad."

### **Trei Hernandez, 21**

*We also met with Trei at MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility. He came to the interview sporting a fresh black eye. It was from a gang fight, he said. He is a member of the Gangster Disciples.*

"I grew up pretty much all over the place, from Texas to Oregon and California, born in Oregon at Emanuel

hospital. (Northeast) Seventh and Dekum was where I went to elementary school.

"It wasn't the best childhood, you know, I didn't – how do I say this? It wasn't like we went without, but we didn't have enough to survive. We had to get it how we lived.

"I grew up with my mom. My pops died at a young age, so he was never in my life. I was 5 (when he died), but he was in and out. I got tons of siblings from his side, so you can only imagine what that means: He was a player! He had all the ladies. He was a good dude though.

"My mom worked at Jack in the Crack (he laughs), Jack in the Box, here in Portland, right off MLK and Lombard. She worked there for a long time, secured herself a little manager position, but that still wasn't enough. We had a lot of kids living at the crib. Me and like 12 other kids, all my little cousins and uncles and aunties, it was a pretty big house.

"I was the man of the house. I was paying bills since the age of 14. Oldest out of all my siblings. It wasn't like I had to do this; it was an option, but I wanted to because it was my mom. I loved my mom to death.

"She took care of us, she fed us, she knew how to cook her ass off, she'd breathe, eat, shit, sleep, work – that's all she did."

*He said he never connected with any of his teachers.*

"I never gave them that satisfaction. Never cared for school. Why be in school when I can be making money? Even as a very little kid, mama had to pick me up from the principal's office. I was seeking attention. I was a bad kid."

### **Josefina, 20**

*Josefina is serving her sentence at Oak Creek Youth Correctional Facility in Albany, an all-girls facility. She joined a gang shortly before her arrest and had been gang-involved for some time leading up to it.*

"I was born and raised in Northeast Portland. My family – we're kind of tight, but we weren't really close. It was the struggles we went through growing up – we came together.

“We’d be homeless for a couple of weeks at a time. We usually got kicked out because my brother would throw parties at the house or terrorize the neighbors. We’d live in our van or live with friends, but it wasn’t for that long, but long enough to know how it feels to be homeless. Or my mom wouldn’t have enough money for the bills and our water would get shut off – or our electricity. Stuff like that, and living in Northeast Portland growing up, there was a lot of gang violence, especially in the area we lived in (Northeast 27th Avenue and Dekum Street), it was like Crips and Bloods. When we were walking to school, we would see people stab each other or shooting.

“I have three sisters and three brothers. One of them was adopted; she was my friend, and my mom took her in. The oldest two had a rare bone disease and needed special medical care, so my mom had to give them to this family that specialized in medical stuff.

“I didn’t have a dad. I’m the baby of the family, but I was the only one who had a different dad.

“My oldest brother that lived with us, he’s like really crazy, and he was getting into trouble.

“My brother being involved in gangs kind of made me be involved. But the stuff I went through with my brothers when I was little, I didn’t really look up to them.

“I didn’t really look up to anybody, because I didn’t have any strong figures in my family. I didn’t even look up to my mom; she was my hero, but I didn’t look up to her.

“My fourth-grade teacher; something about me, she wanted to help me, I got involved in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program, and she was like my mentor-type person. Ever since fourth grade, she was my big sister. Me and her still maintain contact.”

### **Marsel, 22**

*Marsel is at Hillcrest Youth Correctional Facility in Salem. He is a “Hoover,” a member of Portland’s Hoover Criminals, a violent street gang with origins in South Central Los Angeles.*

*Marsel grew up “in Northeast Portland, around Peninsula and the new Columbia Villa, and Irving Park as well.”*

*His mother worked as a housekeeper, and his father owned a janitorial business.*

“My mom and dad were split, so it was kinda hectic dealing with that. Not really a gang upbringing at all.

“If I couldn’t get it from one parent, I could get it from the other parent. They supported me with everything I needed.

“My parents raised me to be basically like a NBA superstar. That’s what they embedded in my life, was sports and school, sports and school, sports and school. But I wasn’t really good at school, so that’s how I kinda eventually ended up in this situation.

“I was just gaming – my parents would get involved, and I would just find a way to manipulate it, and just find a way to do the bare minimum just so I could get them off my back. I wasn’t really learning anything.

“I just thought I couldn’t do it. I didn’t know how to read, so that was tough.

“Around eighth, ninth grade, I started reading about basketball and stuff like that. I started sharpening my skills, reading magazines, the newspaper, and getting on ESPN. Then I came to jail, and I started reading books out of nowhere. I read my first book coming into jail. My first full book. Now, I’m capable, but back then I wasn’t interested or trying to learn. Didn’t really care.

“I was good (at basketball), but I lacked discipline. I wasn’t really coachable. I had skill, but coaches weren’t able to develop those skills because I had an attitude problem.

“I loved basketball. I still do to this day. It’s my favorite thing in the entire world is basketball.”

### **TROUBLE BREWING**

#### **Luis**

*Luis said up until eighth grade, his life revolved around soccer.*

“That was the only thing my grandma did put me in when I was young. I played for a lot of traveling teams.

“I got steered into a different route, eighth grade, freshman year, hanging out with my cousins. There were different things that attracted me. Now, when I think

about it, I should have stuck with soccer because I could have been playing in college and all that. I was traveling places, California, Vegas, for tournaments. I played for the Nike team. I got chosen to play for the youth USA team.”

“One year I just missed (the sign-up deadline), and a lot can happen in a year. I was lost at that age.”

### **Trei**

*Trei said he got his introduction into gang life in Texas at age 13.*

One of my best friends, his dad, he was like that dude, that dude that showed me the lifestyle. We was driving down the street one day and he just passed me one of them thangs (a revolver). It was like, ‘You see that dude over there?’ And I looked at him and I said, ‘Which one?’ He was like, ‘All of them.’ He was like, ‘Shoot,’ and ever since then, it’s just been off the hip.

“I had to. It was them or me. We all called him pops. He was an older homie.”

### **Josefina**

“I started getting into trouble around fifth grade. I started having troubles in school. Up until sixth grade I got A’s and B’s.

“Maybe the fact that I didn’t have a father figure, my dad died before I was born, and my brothers, they were the only male figures that were there, and having them abuse me, physically, mentally, emotionally, like I think that was my biggest thing when I was younger.

“When I was 12, my cousin – she was the leader of this gang – and I hung out with them, but I wasn’t really in one. But a couple months before I got locked up, I actually got jumped into my cousin’s rival gang, which was kind of like a dis on her because I didn’t really like her.

“The motivation was, my co-defendant (her boyfriend), he told me, ‘We need a ride somewhere,’ and the leader of that gang was like, ‘I’m not going to give you a ride unless Tiny (her nickname) gets jumped in.’ Because they had heard about me, my reputation and stuff, and they wanted me in their clique, and they knew my cousin was the leader of their rival gang. I didn’t want to, but we needed a ride, so I did what I did, which I guess is kind of a stupid reason for getting jumped into a gang.”

### **Marsel**

*Marsel’s infatuation with gangsters began when he was 5 years old.*

“I grew up watching cartoons and stuff, just like a normal kid, but there’s this movie called ‘Menace II Society,’ and my mom never let me watch it, but she always had it in her room, and one day I took it, and put it in my PlayStation 2, and I watched it. One of the first scenes, dude got his head blown off, and after that I was scared. But then they were starting to hang out, and chill, and I was like, ‘Oh, that’s pretty tight,’ and the whole movie, they had guns out, and stuff like that.

“I wanted to be a gangster. I want to be hanging out and having guns.

“I never gave my mom the movie back. I kept it until the time I came here.

“I felt like I was brainwashed. My whole life, those characters were kinda real to me, until my last two years of being in the community, and I was like, hold on: These dudes are playing in other movies, and they’re like comedians and other stuff like that. I was like, they’re not really thugs!

“I knew that they were actors, because it was a movie, but I thought that was more of their personality, their culture than just an entertainer.

“I’ve been getting into trouble since I was a little kid, second grade. That’s when things started getting documented and stuff, at school.

“In fifth grade I had a fantasy that I wanted to get shot at one point in my life, like in my arm, to have that wound, to have that as a badge of honor, and then I wanted to go to prison. Then as I hit freshman year I was like, what the fuck? That was dumb.

“My mom would discipline me, take stuff away, spankings and shit like that, but (I’d always) have the essentials.”

“The second half of my freshman year, I started skipping, and then I didn’t gain any credits after the second semester of my freshman year.

“I was fascinated with guns. So like just knowing shit was going on in the streets, it just like intrigued me a little bit.

When I left (an after-school program where he would hang out and sometimes study), I was like, 'OK son, now it's starting to get dark.' That's when shit like basically gets fun."

## IN TOO DEEP

### Luis

"I started changing. I started getting more (material items), and my grandma would ask me, 'How you doing this?' and I wouldn't say nothing, and as I got older, she figured stuff out.

"She'd always speak her mind, but there was nothing she could really do. She would say, 'You gotta move out!'"

"I always wanted nice things, but I didn't like to ask, so I just started doing my own thing so I could get it myself.

"The idea of working a job wasn't appealing at that time and age. You're young, so you want to have fun.

"I was raised around all the gang stuff, all my uncles, everyone in prison. Honestly, the only reason I never joined one was because they were all locked up. We just started getting into drugs, selling and stuff.

*In 2010, when he was 16, Luis and his accomplices robbed three other youths, taking their marijuana at a public park. The incident came out later as a bargaining tool when one of the three youths they had robbed got into trouble, he said.*

*Luis was arrested when he was 18 and was found guilty of first-degree robbery in Multnomah County.*

"I didn't really have a big circle, when events like this took place, it was a small circle, it was all about loyalty, understanding that if this is the type of lifestyle you want to live – a fast lifestyle – this is what comes with it."

*Back then, he said, he didn't see any other paths he could take.*

### Trei

"I just had a baby. I got a kid, you know, times was rough. I was doing everything in my power to provide, and my mom, she wasn't really the open arms (type). She gotta get out; she gotta get it too. She got like six

kids, not counting me, so it's like, 'I can't take on another one.' So I was like, whatever, shot her the middle finger and went about my business, selling dope. It was just the way to go – robbing people, it was just bad. At the time, my life was pretty bad.

"All I could think about was like, I was a baby that had a baby. I was 15 turning 16.

"I didn't know what to do, and then I found out I had a warrant, and I was like, I gotta go. So I got me a Greyhound ticket, and got on the first Greyhound to Oregon (from Texas)."

According to Multnomah County court documents, Trei had two active arrest warrants for robberies he committed in Texas that same year, 2012.

"Told my auntie I was on my way. Within a week of me getting to Oregon, I moved out by myself. Stayed with a girl. She knew I had a kid and it wasn't forever, and I was on the run. It was like, let's party.

"I came down here with quite a bit of money, so I wasn't like mooching. Then my pockets was running dry, so I clicked up with some of the homies out here, because I'm known all over, and I just fell right back into it. And one day, nothing specific, we was all getting drunk, and me and one of my co-defendants – I'm the only person that got caught. Long story short, we went to the store – I'm only 17, and he's fairly older, he's like 24 – I gave him some money for the drinks, and started walking up the streets, and seen the opposition, and he was like, 'Let's kick it,' and I'm like, 'Fuck it, we banging right? Why we gonna stop now?'

I just ran up on him, ended up stabbing the dude eight times. But that's just the price of gang banging. It's like if I chose this lifestyle, then I'm eventually going to have to do things I don't want to do. But since I been doing it for so long, I became equipped – it's almost just like an instinct to just keep doing it. It was weird – you get a gun in your hand, you shoot. You get a knife in your hand, you stab. That's just the way it was."

*Court documents tell a slightly different story. According to reports, Trei, with an accomplice, committed two robberies within minutes of each other late one night in July 2012. One victim suffered a cut on his hand, and another was stabbed in the chest, deflating his right lung. At first he thought he'd been punched.*

## **Josefina**

*Josefina said that as a teenager, the most important thing to her was respect.*

“That’s what I thrived off of, like having a bigger reputation for myself, for like fighting or whatever. I wanted to be known like that.”

*She said at the time, she thought she was getting that respect.*

“But looking back, probably not. I guess I thought people looked up to me, since I didn’t have anyone to look up to. I wanted to be that person that people looked up to and wanted to be like. I was a bit of a show-off. I had a big ego, and I still have a big ego. But now that I look back, I don’t see it as respect. I don’t think I got what I wanted out of it.

“In 2009, when I really started getting involved in gangs and stuff, I had this boyfriend and we were tagging on this school. We were stupid and we put our nicknames on it, and the cops knew us. They saw me and took me downtown Gresham, and I got on probation for a year.

“In 2010 I was in (rehab) for four months.”

*Josefina said she started using drugs and alcohol at age 10. She started using methamphetamine occasionally at age 13.*

“When I got out, I was doing good. I was sober for a few months. And in December I had alcohol poisoning really bad, and I had to go to the hospital, and my mom, she couldn’t take care of me anymore, and so she basically put me in DHS custody. I went to court, and they told me to pack my bags, and they put me in a program, and I didn’t stay there, and I kept running.”

*In 2011, Josefina lured a 13-year-old gang member to his death, at the request of her boyfriend. She claimed in court that she didn’t know her boyfriend and his brother were bringing guns to the altercation and that the victim would die.*

*She is serving a 15-year sentence at Oak Creek Youth Correctional Facility in Albany.*

“He was telling me, ‘Set him up, set him up,’ and I told him no, because he was my friend, and I told him I didn’t want to, and he’s like, ‘If you love me, you would

do it.’ and that’s where he got me, because I did love him and I would do anything for him, and I said ‘OK.’

“Right after it happened, I didn’t want to hang out with that crowd anymore. I wasn’t about any of that stuff no more. I automatically became weak, and I didn’t want to go out anymore. I became afraid of everything and everyone. I wasn’t who I built myself up to be.

I think about how (the victim) is never going to have a birthday or Christmas, or any holidays with his family. I think about it every time there’s a holiday, or on his birthday. I think highly of him.

“I know the media made me seem like I didn’t care, or that I was like cold-hearted, but I’m actually a very caring person. I care about people and how they feel, I think I used to be a bully because I was bullied, and once I started realizing my patterns, like I became – especially in here I realized that – and I became very caring.

“People make mistakes, and some people don’t get second chances, but I do feel bad for what I did.”

## **Marsel**

*For Marsel, fitting in was important, and being in a gang was all about the camaraderie.*

“It’s friends! It’s not even about money. Part of the lifestyle is getting fast money, but getting fast money and the gang lifestyle are kind of separated, in my era. It’s kinda like not mixing business with personal, you know. And like, the gang is more like your personal beliefs or your personal friends.”

*Marsel got a gun his sophomore year of high school. He traded his Xbox 360 for it.*

“At first it started with just shooting in the air and then shooting at nothing and then shooting at a tree.”

“But then, I started having it every day and playing with it and doing shit with it to get myself ready for the moment.”

*Did he know he’d eventually shoot someone?*

“No. I mean I thought about it, like if something happened then yeah, but it wasn’t, ‘I’m going to shoot somebody. I’m going to kill somebody.’ But that’s what

can happen and that's what may happen, because that's what this thing is used for."

*At age 16, Marsel shot and killed a rival gang member at a bus stop in East Portland, resulting in a 19-year sentence.*

*He said he pulled the trigger "to prove to myself and to the people that I was around, that this is the life that I want to sign up for."*

"It started on the bus, the altercation, words being exchanged, and from there, one thing led to another. I told myself, 'Shoot.' And then, 'Don't shoot. Shoot, don't shoot.' I was going back and forth. Then I just turned around and started shooting.

"The altercation, and getting off the bus, all that's happened, so now you just have one choice to make, you going to shoot or not going to shoot. I chose shoot.

"In my mind I was like, this is one of the ultimate levels of disrespect that you can give any gang member. He just gave it to me, so you have one choice to make. You're either going to do it or you're not going to do it.

"I thought about getting caught, and I thought about the glamor of getting caught, and I thought about the praise I would get. My goal was to get away with this, but if I did get caught, all right, well, I'm going to be shining for a while.

"I didn't know that he had died.

"My whole thing was, I don't want to hurt anybody that hasn't physically done any harm to me, so when I found that out he was dead, I was like, I just went against everything that I said. At the end, I shot the gun. I know what bullets do – they kill people."

*Marsel said it was all about respect, but looking back, he sees it differently.*

"I measured myself on a scale that doesn't even matter. None of that matters."

## **INTERVENTION**

*We asked the youths what interventions in their lives might have put them on a more productive path and*

*what they think the Portland community can do to help prevent at-risk youths from committing violent acts.*

### **Luis**

"A big thing would be the schools, the prison pipeline. A lot of schools are zero tolerance for everything, and I think they need to look into that because usually kids in middle school – that's where they start. It's obviously not going to be 100 percent effective, but if they create a strong program that has people who are in this situation go speak to them, that would really help. Obviously, you have to do more than just listening to someone; you have to do more engagement-type things.

"I just want them to change that Measure 11 (mandatory minimum sentencing law). There are a lot of first-time offenders in here. I know people in here – took a cellphone, got like five to 10 (years). It's not worth six years of your life for taking a cellphone.

"They don't realize it's really affecting a lot of people's lives, and not just them as an individual, but their family. A lot of people got kids, a lot of people are that support system for their family, so losing them just makes things crumble.

"If they don't hurt someone, they don't deserve Measure 11 charges. There's other ways out.

"There has to be something designed to help youth. When I was on house arrest, they made me go to AA groups and stuff like that – just being engaged in positive things. They moved me out of Portland to Beaverton with my great-grandma."

### **Trei**

"I grew up around women and my cousins. If I had to pick a role model, it'd probably be the streets – the older homies.

"Honestly, I didn't meet my first role model until I got locked up. Robert Carson. (Carson is an OYA employee.) I look at him like a father figure. He's a good dude. He gets me. I don't know how to explain it.

"I don't think it should take this long, for me to get to this point of my life, before I found a male role model.

“If there was like a group in the community that sincerely cared about the younger generations, and they would try harder, at the end of the day that’s what it really is – for them to try harder. And that the folks that we do look up to growing up – that they wouldn’t take advantage of the young minded. Making us into the folks that we are today.”

“If there was like a group of folks that truly cared about the younger generation, they would actually try to reach out, and take these kids up under their wings, because it doesn’t start in middle school. By the time they get to middle school, they already gone. It’s really elementary school – fifth grade summer, going into sixth grade; that’s where it all really starts. I promise you.

“You gotta get that voice in the community – reach out, go to the school, send out fliers. I promise you, if I’m in fifth grade and I see a flier for community basketball – oh God, I’m there! That’s all it really takes.”

#### **Josefina**

“I wish I was taken out of where I lived, from my family. It wasn’t so much my mom or my sister, but it was my brothers. I try not to hate them, but I can’t help myself if I hate them. I’m not blaming it on them, because everything that I did was my fault, but they made me a little bit of who I was.

“A big thing is for people to listen, and like try to understand, even if they don’t. I remember before I got locked up, like a few months, I had this person who was working with me (a counselor at school). I mean she listened, but she really didn’t. She understood because she was in prison before, but she was still pretty much involved with the life. She was one of them that fell off, like they act like they care and they listen, but they really don’t.

“My outpatient person, I remember telling her I needed help, the whole time I was in DHS custody, which was like six months, I was still doing drugs, I was still drinking. I needed help, and like at that point – I think it’s because they were so done with me, because I kept running.

“The year of my crime, it happened in November, and I remember in June I had just got off DHS custody, but I started doing meth again. I asked to go to treatment, especially like a locked-down facility where I can’t run

from. I tried to ask for help but nobody listened. That was a big thing for me, because I feel like if I would have went to treatment, then none of this would have happened, and I know that because I would have never met my co-defendants.”

#### **Marsel**

“I just wanted to get my message started now: If you do have some type of problem with school or whatever, just seek out help. There are different programs that can help you with school. Stay in sports if you are in any sports or any other activities.

“I think it’s really beneficial when there’s somebody that’s either lived it or that knows somebody close that has. I heard a lot of people say, ‘Oh I’ve done this, oh I know how you’re feeling,’ but it’s like, you had bad grades in high school and now you’re a millionaire. But somebody that actually messed up, and that’s all they do is help others, they’re not getting anything from it because the other ones, they’re like getting paid all this money to be like a motivational speaker.

“People who actually did it, and they just want to help, that’s really what I think is beneficial, and that is something that I would like to do.

“I plan to volunteer at SEI, Self Enhancement Incorporated, that’s where I basically was at my whole middle school years, and I want to go to Texas. My auntie owns a nonprofit organization, the Amadi Guess Foundation. She wants me to talk and tell my story.

*He said he wants to tell at-risk youths:*

Everybody has choices, and every choice will lead you down a certain path. It’s very important to really think about what you’re doing.” Everybody has choices, and every choice will lead you down a certain path. It’s very important to really think about what you’re doing. On my side, I really did think about that whole day. Everything I did was strategic. I signed up for it, so I can’t really complain. With that, you need to think about your choices, and think about where they’re going to lead you, before you make the decision.”

#### **TAKING TIME OUT**

##### **Luis**

*The topic shifted to the soccer program Luis started at MacLaren, and for the first time during our interview,*

*his eyes lit up and he smiled, telling us about MaLaren's victory over a team from Portland Community College.*

"When I get out, I want to start my own little soccer club for fifth grade to high school. I'll gain experience throughout that. I'm passionate about soccer. My plan is to do it for kids who are young, who grow up around this type of lifestyle like I did, and give them the opportunity and choice to be involved in this, to help prevent. Give my type of guidance, whatever I can.

"This place taught me a lot. I kinda don't regret coming here. This is my downtime, from society, to get myself together.

*A letter submitted to a Multnomah County judge on Luis' behalf, three years into his sentence, stated that he "played a pivotal role" in saving the life of a correctional facility employee who had a medical emergency while guarding his living unit.*

*Luis will be released in 2017.*

### **Trei**

"I was taking college, my first term I took 12 credits, and then the next term I took 23 credits, and aced all of them, but then I got kicked out of college for gang violence. I enrolled back in this term, but then I got in this fight, so I don't know how that's going to roll out. I think it will be all right if I get back into it – but that's the life of being in prison.

"I believe that there should always be a chance for you to redeem yourself, and show that you have made progress and have a second look. I think it falls along the lines of what (Luis) was saying: mandatory time, you know, Measure 11. I mean man, nine years ain't no punk. I really wish I could have a review. If I did have a review, I think it would totally change my perception of life and how I act, because then I really got something to strive for. But when you give somebody a mandatory time, and it's like, 'This is the date you're getting out, and there's nothing you can do to change it,' then why change? I have no good time."

"If I had that second look, it would have probably changed the outcome of where I'm at right now. I probably wouldn't have this black eye.

"But I feel like I've changed – nine years, you got nothing but time to think, and I'm not changing for myself, I'm changing for my kid. That's one thing I really want to do is just be the best father that I can be. I don't want my daughter growing up like me.

*But can Trei walk away from gang life?*

*Before giving his response, he looked across the room to Luis. Luis and Trei were the only youths interviewed together. Christina Puentes, the gang-related conflict resolution coordinator at Oregon Youth Authority, said for many gang-involved youths, it's important that they have a witness present when they talk to authority figures, or in this case, to the media. They want someone to vouch that they didn't say anything they weren't supposed to, she said.*

"I don't know if I can (walk away from his gang), but as far as being in that environment all the time, that can definitely change.

"I would never be around the homies unless they're trying to better themselves. I am a changed man. I have strong beliefs about it – not so much the negative things, but the positive things – the barbecues, the extra pair of shoes, 'Here's a new outfit for you,' 'Here ya go, "a lady."' They've done a lot of good things for me. I would never leave it, but I would not surround myself with the negative.

"I look at it like a badge of honor, you know, this is what I've been through in my life. I grew up this way. So if my daughter is in college, I can say when I was your age, I was in jail, we got up out the mud."



*Christina Puentes, the gang conflict resolution coordinator for Oregon's youth correctional facilities.*

**Josefina**

*Oregon Youth Authority's correctional facility for girls doesn't have the wide variety of continuing education options the boys' facilities offer to inmates.*

"The only thing we have is this fiber-optic class, and only like six girls are allowed to be in it because there's only like six sets of tools. They don't really have nothing here to further my education."

*Despite this, she said she's studying history and politics to prepare for when she is able to take college courses later.*

"When I first got locked up, I had this (high school) teacher. Her name was Kristin, and she was my history teacher, and memorizing the dates of like World War I and World War II, she was like, 'Oh my God, good job!' And that's kind of what boosted me up. And I started reading more into, like, history, and it became my favorite subject."

*Josefina said it was the first time a teacher had told her she was good at something, and simply hearing that motivated her to pursue the subject.*

*When she turns 24, she'll be transferred to Coffee Creek, an adult facility. Sometimes, she said, the idea scares her.*

*So what's the first thing she'll do when she gets out?*

"I just want to walk on a sidewalk and go get some McDonald's. From there on, a couple years down the road, if I have a college degree – I want to do everything. I don't have my heart set on a certain type of career. Everything is interesting to me. Wherever I end up, in any type of job, that's just fine with me."

*Josefina has 10 1/2 years left on her sentence.*

**Marsel**

"The reality set in when I was here. And then I started missing out on certain things, like playing basketball – guys my age playing high school basketball – a dream that I had. Playing for Jefferson High School, winning state titles.

*At 6-foot-3, Marsel looks like he'd easily dominate a high-school basketball court.*

"Then my girlfriend going to prom – I couldn't go to prom with her. And then my graduation came up. My

grade-point average was terrible, so I didn't have credits to graduate that year, but I was in here while my friends were graduating, and then my girlfriend graduated, and now my girlfriend goes to college and I'm still in here.

"Right now I'm just hanging out. I plan to get back into school this term. I got my barber's license. I got my high school diploma. I'm mentoring a little bit."

Marsel has his own room in the mental health unit, where he mentors younger inmates. It's an option available to youths who have earned their way up OYA's "tag system," in which a youth's privileges are based on the length of time they've behaved. Marsel said he especially likes to mentor gang-affiliated youths.

"Regardless if you're a Crip, you're a Blood, you're from Hoover, I don't care where you're from, but if you're a gang member, for some reason, I'm drawn to that, you know, just to talk about the positives and negatives of both sides. And there's not really too many positives about gangs. A lot of it is just about sports because a lot of gang members, for some reason, play sports, at some point, and have love for sports. But they don't like school, and for some reason get close to graduating (and get off track). And it's like, all right, 'You can graduate. I can't go home and play basketball, and football, but you can.'

"To be honest with you, I had my turning point, and then I had another turning point going the opposite way. And now I'm kinda turning back. My first turning point, it was like, I got it. I know what I want to do with my life."

*Marsel said he plans to open his own barbershop when he gets out – anywhere but Portland, maybe in Eugene or Corvallis.*

"But then time starts going by, and it's like, well I'm still here because of the choices that I made. I'm gonna keep going back and forth. Might as well go back now. And then I was like, 'Hold on! I don't want this for myself. Now I'm coming back around.'"

*Marsel has three years left in OYA custody, then he'll be transferred to adult prison, where he'll serve the remaining eight years of his sentence.*