

GANG Buster

Boyd Osegueda, a Native American and reformed juvenile delinquent, fights to keep organized crime off his reservation.

Boyd Osegueda considers himself a modern-day warrior.

He bears the dark eyes and round face of the Tohono O'odham people, as well as the scars and tattoos from 16 years as a gang banger. Now 25, Osegueda says he is fighting the good fight, trying to convince young gang members to go straight.

But Osegueda is no urban gang reformer. His battlefield is the Tohono O'odham Indian nation, where gang influence has been on the rise since the early '90s.

Approximately the size of Connecticut, the Tohono O'odham Reservation is the second-largest in the United States. For 6,000 years the Tohono O'odham — formerly known as the Papago — have lived on this land, which extends from west of Tucson into Sonora, Mexico.

As many as 25 gangs now operate on the reservation, which mostly consists of small, remote villages separated by shrubby hills and miles of rugged desert terrain. National studies show that gangs are a problem in more than three-quarters of the nation's Indian communities, and experts say they were imported by gang-affiliated tribal members, like Osegueda, who came from urban areas and brought their gangs with them.

Sitting in the tribal youth services office where he now works, Osegueda sports thick gold chains, small hoop earrings and a rat tail. These are remnants of his past that still draw wary stares from shopkeepers who don't know him. But to troubled teens on the reservation, they are visible proof that he understands them, that he's been there.

Growing up in a rough West Los Angeles neighborhood, Osegueda started banging at the age of 9, when he stole a car and was arrested for the first time. By 12, he was serving time for his involvement in a drive-by shooting.

In 1992, as gangs were beginning to emerge on reservations all over Arizona, Osegueda came to the Tohono O'odham nation with his mother, who grew up in the tiny reservation village of Hickiwan. Almost as soon as he arrived, he began recruiting new gang members.

"It was so easy," he said. "I picked on the ones who were dysfunctional in some way, the ones who didn't really know who they were."

A year later, Osegueda was serving time in the tribal jail in Sells for a drive-by shooting in Gila Bend. Not long after he was arrested, Osegueda's daughter was born. That event became the turning point of his life.

It would be days before Osegueda learned whether the baby was a boy or a girl. He finally got the news from a guard, who told him that his daughter was delivered breech.

"Breech?" Osegueda asked. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know," the guard had answered. "But I think it means she could have died."

Then he left Osegueda to sit in his cell and think about that.

"For the first time, I understood what it would feel like to lose someone," he said.

But the journey back didn't happen all at once. It was long and sometimes painful, with the old ways always lurking on the other side of change.

"After you get out [of a gang] comes life, and my God, what a hard one that is," he said.

With a reputation and a criminal record, Osegueda was turned down for job after job. But he persevered. He began doing outreach in the community, speaking at youth conferences and consulting with other tribes about their gang problems. That work came to the attention of the tribal leadership and the office of youth services, the one place where his background could be put to good use.

Now, through his job at the youth services department, Osegueda works with at-risk youths. On his own, he visits jailed tribal members and speaks at Indian conferences all over the country. He believes that fighting in the war against gangs is what he was destined to do. It's the purpose behind all the madness, and the reason he made it out alive.

The hardest part is seeing the active gang members he recruited.

"They tell me straight out, you made me this way and I'm not going to change," he said. "That's when the pain really comes. I have to live with that."

But if life at times feels like it's a battle, at least Osegueda now knows what he's fighting for.

To remind himself, he carries evidence of at least one victory in his wallet. It is a letter from a 17-year-old gang member who has decided to get out. He reads it every day. It begins, "Thank you for letting me know who I am."

PM

Writer Kathy Khoury lives in Chandler.

"After you get out [of a gang] comes life, and my God, what a hard one that is."

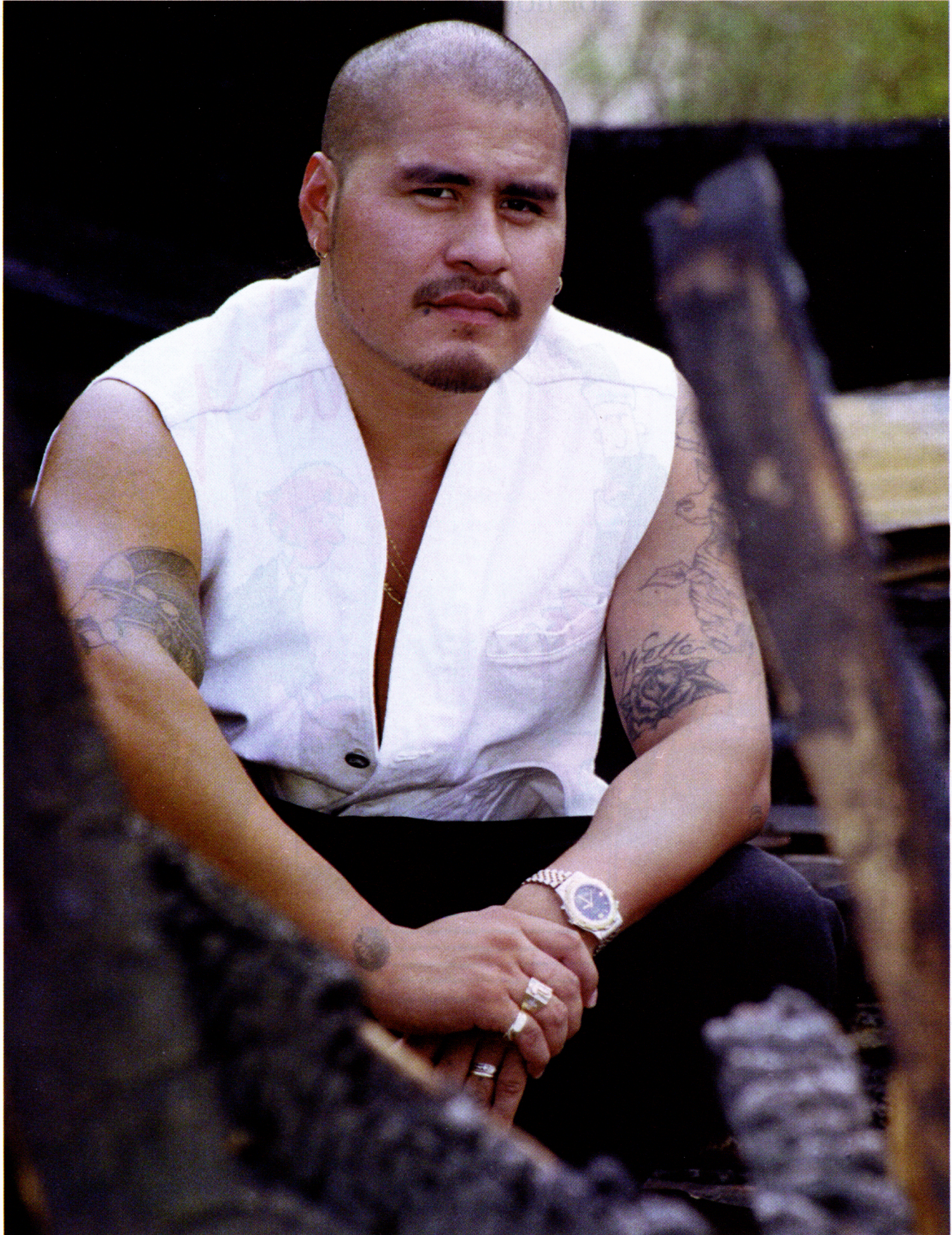


Photo by E.B. McGovern