

## Ex-gang member on path to better future

Teen turns life around by choosing to work at Boys & Girls Club, where he says 'I can just be me'

By Neil Gonzalez

REDWOOD CITY — Manuel Contreras loved to fight, to street brawl. He was running with a gang from a tough neighborhood in south Redwood City. "Manny Lokz" was his nickname.

"I was one crazy dude," said Contreras, 19, showing a compact, boxer's build and close-shaven head. He had been in and out of juvenile hall and kicked out of several schools when his probation officer gave him a deal: Do community service at the local Boys & Girls Club or spend more time in lockup. Contreras took the deal and has found a different gang to run with — one that has inspired him to change his attitude and outlook on life.

Instead of searching for fights, he's looking out for young children and helping them with homework and other needs at the club.

Since first walking into the club about three years ago, he has earned his diploma from an alternative high school, won scholarships and attended Cañada College.

His turnaround has brought him the club's Youth of the Year award and a commendation from the San Mateo County Board of Education.

"I like to have fun in a good way, not the old way," said Contreras, who works at the club as a social education assistant. "Here I can just be me. I have a big smile on my face. Here I can help."

That's a sharp contrast to the world he knew not too long ago. "When I was growing up, (so-called friends) only helped me do crime," he said. Contreras primarily was raised by his grandmother in a poor, rough Redwood City community known as "Little Mex." But he also had to move to and from various cities such as East Palo Alto and Oakland with his divorced mother and siblings. Every time we moved around it was always into a ghetto," he said. "So the friends I made were gang members and drug dealers. It was difficult."

He started using drugs, stealing and fighting rival gang members. Contreras didn't really like drugs, he said, but "I just did it to act cool and be with my friends. And if I was high, I could steal."

His life reached the point where he didn't care what happened to him. "I was kicked out of schools in the district and felt like I had no hope for the future," he said. "I think I just had anger." Contreras said that rage developed and festered from the beatings he and his sister endured from their mother. He also saw someone else molest another sister. However, that inner

turmoil slowly but steadily calmed after making the deal with his probation officer.

"The more he hung out (at the Boys & Girls Club), the more opportunities he got and more responsibilities," said Peter Pheap, an associate unit director for the organization.



MATHEW SUMMER/STAFF  
MANUEL CONTRERAS, 19, helps Brianna Melgosa, 6, with reading at the Boys & Girls Club in Redwood City.

"He's just a great kid. The more he was here, he wanted to get better."

At the club, Contreras picked up computer skills and learned how to produce videos and music. He eventually was hired as a staff member.

At Cañada, he took early childhood education, writing and other classes. He recently joined the Navy and aspires to work in a nuclear submarine.

Although he has paved a positive path, Contreras is not completely out of the woods. "He's still a work-in-progress," Pheap said. "He still struggles in school. I think the opportunity to join the military will keep him more stable and get him out of Redwood City so he doesn't fall into gangs again." The club's children won't want Contreras to go, though. "He's nice," said Dayonna Garofani, 10. "He plays with us and buys us stuff like chips and juices. He'll share food with me." Ayana Herrera, 9, said she can count on Contreras. "He'll always help you with anything you need, like homework and foosball games," she said. "If you ask him to be your friend, he'll do it."

Contreras enjoys serving as a role model to the youngsters. "It's inspiring to have so many kids look up to me," he said. "Kids tell me they want to be like me. I tell them to be better than me." For more information about the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula, visit <http://bgcp.org>.