

Former Gang Member Plan to Take Cities for Jesus

Thanks to Youth GANG, gang members are preaching life in Jesus over life in the 'hood

Victory Outreach International's founding pastor, Sonny Arguinzoni, was holding a gang rally in an east Los Angeles stadium years ago when gang members turned to a rival group and began flashing hand symbols.

Words were exchanged, challenges made, and a fight broke out in the middle of the service. Young ministry workers, not long removed from the same lifestyle, waded into the melee, facing fierce fighting and flashing knives.

Arguinzoni, realizing the fight could quickly engulf the 15,000 youth at the rally, took a microphone and cued the band. "All you Christians out there join with me," he intoned and began a lively rendition of "I'm So Glad Jesus Set Me Free."

Today, Arguinzoni sits in an overstuffed easy chair in his plush office inside the ministry's 20-acre La Puente, Calif., headquarters and laughs at the incident. "Some of our ushers had black eyes and bloody noses, but no one was seriously hurt, and they got it all under control. It wound up [being] one of the best crusades we had. We had a fantastic altar call," he said.

Arguinzoni has long been willing to risk harm to win souls—perhaps because someone risked harm to win his. A gang member at age 12 and a heroin addict at 15, he had been jailed

10 times before a “gringo” preacher from Pennsylvania—David Wilkerson—walked up to him in his Brooklyn, N.Y., barrio and told him he could have victory in Jesus.

Wilkerson had just founded his addictions-recovery ministry, Teen Challenge. Arguinzoni later started a ministry to inner-city youth that now operates in 18 countries.

Arguinzoni’s oldest son, Sonny Jr., founded Youth GANG (God’s Anointed Now Generation) in 1992. Two years ago, he turned it over to his younger brother, Tim.

Recently, at the opening of GANG’s “Power People Arise” convention, Tim Arguinzoni took the pulpit before a packed-out sanctuary of 4,000 people. “No matter where you are, the inner city is in your backyard,” he said to those assembled. “This is our power spot, and this is where we are anointed to be. Our focus is to fulfill the vision God gave us in 1967.”

It was in 1967 that Sonny Arguinzoni started his ministry, after God led him out of Teen Challenge. Wilkerson’s first convert, Nicky Cruz, had been a notorious gang leader who became a preacher and was made famous by Wilkerson’s book *The Cross and the Switchblade*.

Cruz had led Arguinzoni to Christ in the first Teen Challenge center in Brooklyn and later had convinced him to attend Bible college. Arguinzoni, of Puerto Rican and Italian descent, graduated from the Latin Bible Institute near Los Angeles, where he met and married his wife, Julie.

Arguinzoni had quickly started his first church in the volatile Boyle Heights section of east Los Angeles. Scoffers

had tagged it "The Addict Church."

"When I graduated, I thought I was going to go get a nice church somewhere," Arguinzoni said. "I didn't know I was going back into the ghetto. Then I look up, and I got a church full of gang members. In those days it was like a reproach to have that kind of church."

Then the Lord began to reveal to Arguinzoni that He wanted to raise up these men and women to reach their own neighborhoods.

Arguinzoni didn't just preach to addicted gang members. For 14 years he and Julie invited them to live in their home. During that time the couple had five children: Debbie, Doreen, Georgina, Sonny Jr. and Tim.

Julie Arguinzoni heads up an outreach and discipleship program to women who have escaped drugs, gangs and prostitution. The ministry has 500 inner-city rehabilitation homes and churches from Mexico to Holland to the Philippines.

Sonny Arguinzoni Jr. is personable and organized and the senior pastor at the huge mother church. Tim Arguinzoni preaches with fire and flair, as he did at the recent GANG convention.

"I believe the day is coming when you'll see 1,000 churches all over the world built by people who have come up through GANG," he wailed as he walked back and forth before an enraptured audience of youths whose average age was 21. "We are called to win souls in every inner city in the world," he shouted.

Sonny Arguinzoni has seen his vision materialize before his eyes, and that night at the convention he was watching it again. Currently, 10,000 men and women undergo discipleship in Victory Outreach recovery homes. This year the Assemblies of God gave Arguinzoni their "Diligent Christian Leader Award," and he received a letter from President George W. Bush.

In the audience were youth from around the world. Coming down from the stage, Tim Arguinzoni marched back and forth, a few feet from the crowd, stopping to mop his wet brow and, with real travail, pour out his latest version of the vision.

The youth shouted and whistled, and many jumped to their feet and danced to the rhythm of the band. When Tim Arguinzoni asked those called to full-time ministry to raise their hands, at least 1,000 people responded.

"When they were in a gang they were totally committed to the gang and understood that if they had to, they would give their lives for the neighborhood," Arguinzoni said. "So when they come to Christ, they say, 'If I was willing to give my life for the neighborhood, how much more am I going to give my life for Jesus?'"

As the music blared, the wide space between the front seats and the stage swelled with youth. Hearts that had felt fear melted and broke. Eyes that had seen horror filled with tears. Sonny and Julie Arguinzoni stood quietly, hands raised, heads bowed and absorbed the moment.

Later, when asked their feelings, Sonny Arguinzoni could only shake his head in wonder. Just as the apostle Paul reported, some things are too close to heaven to describe.

–Ed Donnally in Los Angeles