

Invading the Danger Zone

Most people stay away from gang territory. Roger Minassian saw what violence was doing to youth in Fresno, California, and he ran to their rescue.

Former gang member Toua Thao confessed he was worried the first time he met Roger Minassian in the inner-city ganglands of Fresno, California. "At first, he seemed a bit intimidating," recalls 21-year-old Thao. "He can look real mean."

Other ex-gang members agree. They know what it's like to come face-to-face with the meanest, most violent dudes in the 'hood. But cross Reverend Roger? The thought sends shivers down their spines.

Minassian's 6-foot-5-inch frame and piercing glare could send boxer Mike Tyson hot-footing it down the street like Roadrunner. But the truth is he is not that scary. He's a remarkably normal, down-to-earth, 64-year-old guy who is married, with three grown-up sons and just a hint of fatherly sternness.

What's amazing is that he has helped lift hundreds of gang members off the streets and set them on the path to self-sufficiency and a productive life.

Born and raised in New York City, Minassian was sheltered from the darker side of urban life. The son of a minister, Minassian says his own faith in Christ began to blossom in college. After moving to California, and a stint in the U.S. Navy, he felt God's calling to the ministry and was ordained in 1971.

Since 1993, Hope Now for Youth—founded and directed by Minassian—has placed gang youths in jobs and fostered caring relationships with them built on mutual respect, thus enabling individuals to transform their lives. The results are staggering. In just a decade, more than 900 at-risk and gang-oriented young men—a mix of Hispanics, Asians, African Americans and Anglos—have been placed in permanent jobs, with an 85 percent success rate.

Minassian says he's simply being obedient to a vision God gave him after the infamous 1992 Los Angeles riots. It was then that Minassian says he felt God calling him to leave his comfortable pastorate in a middle-class church to minister to the lowest of the low: murderous, drug-pushing gang members on the streets of downtown Fresno, a central California city with a diverse population of 430,000.

"I remember watching the L.A. riots on television and thinking: 'What despair causes people to set fire to their own neighborhoods? Where are the jobs they're supposed to have?'" Minassian told Charisma.

Haunted by the images of destruction in Los Angeles and reports of gang-related homicides in Fresno, Minassian quit the pastorate and launched Hope Now. Leaving his church haven of polite handshakes and well-to-do parishioners, Minassian entered a vastly different world of crippling poverty, brokenness, violence and crime.

"I've always had a deep compassion for the poor and the underdog," says Minassian, a Presbyterian, and author of the newly released *Gangs to Jobs* (Alpha Publishing). "But I'd always worked in middle-class-and-above parishes. I'd had absolutely no contact with the type of young men I am working

with now. I didn't even know that their world existed."

Minassian recalls one of his first excursions into a gang-dominated neighborhood. "As I saw the kids around me, God began breaking my heart," he says.

"I met a 14-year-old boy whose mom was a heroin addict and whose dad was in prison. I could see this boy's heart-wrenching pain, his seething anger—the rage that creates gang members. As I drove away, I began to cry ... deep sobs ... and, believe me, I don't cry easily. I cried out to God: 'How do these kids stand any chance? Someone has to do something, or they've got no hope. Jesus, how do I reach them with Your love?'"

Isaiah 61:1-3 became the rallying cry for Hope Now: "The Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor ... to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners ... to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes ... and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair ... they will be called oaks of righteousness" (NKJV).

Explains Minassian: "At Hope Now, we are there to do this for the Lord because He cries for these broken young men just like we do. I have yet to meet one gang member who is not a wounded child in an adult body, crying out for someone to help them and care for them."

Minassian says he has never felt seriously threatened even though he is working in a dangerous environment. "I've learned that these hurting young men are just as terrified of us as we are of them. In fact, our world is more fearful to them than

facing the barrel of a loaded gun," he says.

Not everyone, though, views the Fresno area's estimated 11,000 hard-core gang members with the same compassionate acceptance. One woman approached Minassian and told him: "Most of us don't care about these street kids so long as they're shooting each other."

But the wider church, and the law enforcement community, have embraced Hope Now—praising its life-transforming success.

Minassian and his team teach residents of the ghettos basic survival skills for the alien world of appointments, steady jobs and responsibilities. As relationships develop, former street fighters are coming to Christ.

The hard part is discipleship because the men come from a culture in which nothing is scheduled. "We show up at their workplace at lunchtime, take them out for a bite to eat and do a Bible study," Minassian explains.

In the same way Hope Now participants must discipline themselves to live responsibly, U.S. Christians must discipline themselves to live obediently to God's voice, Minassian adds.

"I am convinced that most Christians have been given a vision from God that they have deemed impossible and have ignored," he says. "We say: 'No way! I can't do that!' But if Jesus is truly giving us the vision, backed up by Scripture, then He will provide the means to accomplish it."

Former gang member Vanna In, 27, who is employed as a Hope Now counselor, describes Minassian as a no-nonsense, fatherly figure. "This is not a game to him; it is very real," In says. "He knows that the lives and the souls of young men are at stake."

Imprisoned for seven years for second-degree murder, In understands firsthand the battle that is raging. "We know that our enemy—the devil—does not slack off," he says. "And neither must we."

When former gang member Corey McKenzie was imprisoned for a murder he committed as a teenager, his future appeared to be over. Two years ago, he was released on parole and joined Hope Now. Today he holds down a steady job at a local restaurant. "I have four months left on parole, and I am not going to violate," he says.

Within Hope Now, 24-year-old McKenzie—like hundreds of former gang members—has experienced caring relationships for the first time. "I don't know many people that I can call a friend," he says. "But Roger Minassian is a true friend."

Julian Lukins, a former daily newspaper reporter, is a writer based in California. He and his wife, Rebekah, have two daughters.

For more information about Hope Now, call 559-434-8125. Send tax-deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, Attn.: Unsung Heroes, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248.