

In Gang Spiritual Warfare, Fear is No Option

Fear is never an option when Sonny Lara braves his way in the treacherous, gang-infested areas of San Jose, California. When God instructs him when and where to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, he simply has no choice to shun the fear of man and obey God.

Considering where he came from as a drug dealer and a gang lord—the very pit of hell as he describes it—his mission as a soldier of Christ thrusts him daily onto the front lines of an intense spiritual battle against demonic forces. Through his almost inconceivable life experiences, Lara has gained the favor of God—and the upper hand on the enemy when it comes to evangelizing his own kind.

Through his ministry for the past 30 years, Firehouse Community Development Corporation, Lara has no hesitation in saying he's seen tens of thousands of gang members that might otherwise be languishing in prison or strung out on drugs in the streets of San Jose come to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

But before that can happen, Lara says, he must be able to hear the voice of God clearly about where he is to preach. Like Jonah, he is sometimes tempted to run the other way when God tells him to “go to Nineveh.”

But unlike Jonah, he never fails to discern God's commands, even if it means staring down the barrel of many guns or the sharp point of a switchblade. And that happens more often than he has cared to remember.

“Take a look at 2 Corinthians, chapter 3 and verses three and four. Paul says that Satan is the god of the world that blinds the minds of non-believers,” says Lara, the host of Miracle

Madness on the Charisma Podcast Network. "What we do is we tear that veil off of their minds.

"God gave me a vision from Acts 18, nine through 11. It says there that Paul had a vision and that the Lord told him, 'don't be afraid. Speak out. Don't be silent, for I am with you. No one will attack and harm you, for many people in this city belong to me. And it says Paul stayed there for the next year and a half, teaching the word of God.'

"You go somewhere you know that's dangerous because you trust God. When you go on your own accord, you might get beat up or worse. You might not make it out. I've known other preachers where they've gotten beaten up. They thought that Jesus told them He was going to let them in. It's not what you say sometimes, it's how you say things. When you are in their territory, you had better hear God because God will give you the strategy. They will not be able to resist or counter what you say because what you said was spoken through the Holy Spirit. God will give you words that they need to hear that will calm them down. Because of that, you go in pretty fearless."

And that's because the favor of man has not only been bestowed upon him, but also the incredible favor of God for the past 25 years.

Since 1986, Lara has been recognized as a gang expert by San Jose city and California state officials. Firehouse is part of the gang task force of the city of San Jose and provides gang intervention, crisis response and leadership to at-risk youth.

The organization has helped decrease crime in San Jose, including homicide and vandalism. Lara and his team have helped transition individuals and families into the mainstream of society as contributing members. Perhaps no one is a better example of this than Anthony Sanchez.

Sanchez is a protégé of Lara and a self-made millionaire.

Sanchez often accompanies Lara on his trips to the at-risk areas of San Jose, where they both know their lives can be snuffed out by a gang member at any time.

"When we go to these places, it's all God," says, Sanchez, 30. "We prepare the ground before we get there. We're always praying, praying, praying because we don't know what's there until we get there. Sonny goes into these most dangerous of neighborhoods simply because he has the favor of God.

"When we go to these places, we know they are against us. I feel a lot more pressure on me because I'm younger and they don't respect me as much as Pastor Sonny. I may not feel as confident or comfortable as he is, but I do feel a warmth of protection because of the anointing I know Pastor Sonny has upon him. I am alert to what is happening and what could happen. They don't want us there, but we know that God wants us there because we are sent there to do His work and to see lives changed. That's the comfort and protection that I feel when we go into these dangerous neighborhoods."

Ruben Chavez, who worked with Lara on gang intervention for several years as a member of the San Jose Police Department and as the Chief of Police in Livingston, California, says it's hard to miss God's anointing on Lara's life, and that's what keeps him alive in even the most dangerous gang situations.

"Everybody knows about Sonny, and when you look at him, you think, 'man, this guy is a great preacher,'" says Chavez, who is now Chief of Police in Gustine, California. "Sonny has gained the respect of some of the most powerful and high-ranking people in city government, with police chiefs and with the police force overall. They know who he is and they trust him.

"He's got no fear because he knows God has his back. He's very bold, and he does things you wouldn't think anyone would dare

do. He trusts God to take care of him, and that's exactly what he does. Pastor Sonny's got a unique gift and a vision. When I was chief of police in Livingston, gang violence and crime was reduced by 90 percent, and a lot of that is due to him and Firehouse. If that's not anointing, I don't know what is."

Headed for Hell, Redeemed by the Cross

Lara's work with Firehouse is long way from where Lara came from as a youth in the 1970s. Living under what he says was a "generational curse," his grandfather was a member of the Hispanic syndicate, and his father always carried a gun for various reasons.

Lara himself became a member of a gang and began to carry drugs at age 12, and he was shot for the first time carrying out gang activity at age 18. With his background, he figured, his life was predestined for nothing but trouble.

"I grew up in the streets where only the strong survive," Lara says. "I've stabbed people, I've been stabbed, I've had my head cracked open many times and I've had guns under my chin. My friends and I formed a gang to defend ourselves and what was ours, and I was the leader. I got kicked out of several schools. I went to school for all the wrong reasons.

"But eventually, God started working on me. John 10:10 says that Jesus came to give us life and life more abundantly. I eventually tried to find God, but I didn't know how to connect with Him. Eventually I got arrested and spent a great deal of time in prison."

Lara says it was after he turned 27 that he dropped to his knees and asked God, 'are you for real?' The voice of God came to him in 1979 and said to him, "serve Me or make this place (prison) your home."

"I was always wanting change, but I didn't know how to do it," Lara said. "I didn't want to go into a program that wasn't for

real. I needed to hear directly from Jesus. I asked him to put a desire in me to hear His Word. At first, I didn't want to read it. I couldn't read it. But the Holy Spirit wouldn't leave me alone."

Indeed, the Holy Spirit kept poking Lara when he was released from prison in 1984. He started his first Bible study in 1985, and Lara says God helped renew and redeem his marriage to his wife, Linda, that same year.

After working with several other agencies, including the Mexican American Community Services Agency, and making a huge impact on the culture of San Jose, the Laras started Firehouse in 1991 and has seen it grow by leaps and bounds.

Firehouse offers programs of intervention, which include mediation and crisis intervention; redirection and education of youth; rap sessions, which consist of individual or small process group discussion which helps you build trust and establish a healthy relationship with staff and peers; tattoo removal, which helps in the assistance in the removal of gang-related, hateful and incriminating tattoos (a program Lara says has saved many lives); and community service, which provides rewarding opportunities for youth to give back to the communities.

Firehouse's Outreach program assists young people in becoming self-reliant and self-sufficient in all aspects of life. Its mobile outreach unit is a team of trained individuals who are contracted with the city of San Jose to identify at-risk youth and to build relationship. Firehouse's goal is to "ignite youth for success" and give them the necessary skills to be productive members of the community.

A Prime Example

The program worked miracles for Sanchez, who met Lara in 2007 and instantly became mesmerized with the message he preached. While Sanchez didn't get saved until 2015, his respect for

Lara never waned since they met, mainly because he saw much of Lara in himself.

“I knew immediately that this man had something to say,” says Sanchez, who was arrested more than 14 times in his early life. “He once told us that whatever doors God opens for you, no man can close them. He never said that was a scripture in the Bible, but I wrote that down. That’s something that a leader would say. Every decision I made after that I took that scripture to heart.

“He invited me to church, and gave opportunities to be responsible, and I took them. He is a very credible person in my eyes. He helped me get through his after-school program and to navigate my way out of the gang lifestyle through his mentorship. He helped me to understand who I am, and who I am in Christ.”

But Sanchez knew he simply couldn’t leave his gang. He had to fight his way out—literally. He had to fight three members of his gang to resign, and with God’s grace, he survived and “jumped out.”

That’s when he began to become a successful businessman. At 23, Sanchez made his first million through an online company. He parlayed that venture into several other businesses he now owns that helps him to give back to the community with both his time and money.

“We do fundraisers, we’ve provided a building for an after-school program for at-risk kids, and we have an outreach team as well,” Sanchez said. “I’m in a position now to give my money and to support things we really believe in, like Firehouse and Pastor Lara. We’ve seen a lot of changes in kids, a lot of behavior changes, and it’s very rewarding to see families reunited and to see these kids get back on the right path.”

Another Redeemed Life

Along with his wife, Linda, Lara has helped build a team that is making a huge impact for Christ in the impoverished areas of San Jose. One of his team members, Outreach Supervisor Jose Marquez, is a former gang member who says he was “deeply caught up” in a life that “was headed nowhere” prior to meeting Lara in an evangelism situation in 1993.

After first rejecting Lara and his “Jesus” message, at 14 Marquez began to listen intently to Lara’s words simply because of their similar backgrounds. When Marquez began to learn more about Lara’s life filled with drugs, violence, arrests and prison, he soon came to the realization that the life he led had little meaning. The desire to escape that life began to consume him.

Connecting himself with Lara—and Jesus—he thought, was the only way out.

“My parents were good people, it’s just that they worked all of the time and they rarely were able to spend any time with me,” Marquez says. “But in my neighborhood, there were two gangs, one northern gang and one southern gang, and we were part of the southern gang. When I started getting older, the older kids in our neighborhood began feeding us lies about how different the members of the northern gang were, kids that I had spent my elementary school years with. And that’s how it all started.

“At first we didn’t want to have anything to do with Sonny. We actually thought he was from a rival gang. And then his sister-in-law brought him in, and his message was positive. We liked what we heard, and he kept coming around. I liked his story of everything that he had been through. It was real, and he began to encourage us that there was something better in life.

“Sonny was able to get me a job when I was 18, and I began to realize that Sonny really believed in me. That was a good

feeling. I've been with Sonny since 2007, about 14 years, and it's an honor for me to work beside him and to help him, though Jesus, to save other people's lives."

Marquez has seen both good and bad times in his work with Firehouse. He has seen youth that he has personally worked with get killed through gang activity, and the enemy almost convinced him to give up because that experience.

Marquez says he's had more guns pointed in his direction than he cares to remember.

But thankfully, Marquez says, through his co-workers, and the Holy Spirit, he was convinced to stay with it.

"I've been doing this for a while, and I like to work with kids that are high risk and get to them before they are recruited by these gangs," Marquez says. "I have seen some of these kids really break out and make something of themselves. They are adult men now—some construction workers, some electricians and others—and they have families now. They've learned the life skills to keep them out of trouble.

"A lot of these kids we work with are stuck in the neighborhood, but we let them know that, with Jesus, there is light at the end of the tunnel. There's more out there to explore. I know that I have to keep running the race God has set before me, and that's what I tell these kids. They need to do the same thing and they will be rewarded."

No Fear

With the backing of the mayor's office and the city of San Jose, Lara and Firehouse has helped change the cultural landscape of the city of San Jose. And, he says, he will continue to infiltrate areas of the city—and other cities when needed—to spread the gospel of Christ without fear for his own life.

"I go back to the apostle Paul and the book of Acts. It says, 'don't be afraid, no one will attack and harm you, for many people in tihs city belong to me.

"God is sending us to these dangerous places beause we are the light to darkness. God gives me verses like Proverbs 16:7, Psalm 23:1-5, Proverbs 3:5-6, 2 Timothy 1:7 and Psalm 91:1-16 because He doesn't want me to be afraid and because He wants me to know that He is with me."

For those who wish to escape the gang lifestyle or who need prayer, please contact Sonny Lara at linsonlara@.

Shawn Akers *is an assistant online editor with Charisma Media.*