

When I look back at my childhood and remember the people in my neighborhood, the memories of my heart illuminate with joy, longing, and grief. Yet, the grief that I feel isn't because of reignited trauma; instead, it's linked to how much I miss the people of my childhood. I grew up fatherless, and my family endured so much adversity, particularly as it related to gang violence. My childhood consisted of being around neighborhood gang members. They played a major role in raising me as did my other family, and many of the people in my neighborhood. When they say it takes a village to raise a child, that certainly was the case for me. Did my life turn out ordinary or ideal by their influence, no, but I certainly felt their love and protection throughout my childhood. One thing in particular, Martin Cabrera, was a huge influence in my life.

Martin Cabrera was a community activist and social worker who worked at our [indiscernible] community center "Casa Atazlan." He took a special interest in the people from our block and he was one [indiscernible]. Every year on Thanksgiving and Christmas he made sure that families on our block received turkeys so that we could have our holiday family meals. He was well loved by everyone he associated with. Even though he wasn't gang-affiliated, he was certainly accepted as one of us.

When it came to me, he became like a father figure to me. He'd take me places, like to the carnival, to family outings with his daughters and he introduced me to many of the people that he was connected to. He even took me to joints to visit one of his good friends. His friend was a big-time drug dealer from the neighborhood who was generous with his profits and did good things for the community. When he (Tony) got out, he took an instant liking to me and looked out for me financially, bought me clothes, and took me to family outings with his

children. These two men, both father figures to me, were very influential in my life and looked out for me.

One day when I was about eight years old I received news. News that Martin Cabrerra was killed in a car accident in Mexico. It crushed my heart when I heard that news. I remember going to the funeral and as I kneeled before him to pay a prayer, a song was playing “Daddy’s Home.” Everytime I hear that song, I’m reminded of Martin Cabrerra. A great man whose memory lives on in my heart forever. I’ll never forget him as his memory lives on in me.

This man was loved so much that every year when I was a child, a float and large group of his loved ones marched in the Mexican Independence Day Parade on 26th Street. Tony was instrumental in organizing this memorial march in his honor. Tony also took a bigger role in my life as a father figure.

One day Tony took me to meet his extended family who resided in a large factory that they owned in the neighborhood. His father, step-mom, and many half siblings instantly fell in love with me and within months, I ended up living with this family who took me in as their own. It’s something how every mom and grandma were okay with this now that I think about it, but this is what community looked like for us. I literally had a village raising me. The unlikeliest of characters played a role in raising me. While they couldn’t keep me out of becoming a gang member and a drug dealer, I still credit them with instilling core values in me that shaped who I am as a person today. Through them and most people from my neighborhood, I developed loyalty, love, respect, a desire to be good to the people of my community, and so many other things.

These influences in my life are why I continue to have a strong desire to build community. They are the reason why I believe that unity is possible. They are the reason that

despite being in a constant hate war with rival gangs that it was still possible to connect with community members with no gang connections and to look out for their well being. They showed me the importance of respecting our elders.

Tony too passed away, murdered shortly after his release from a prison stint in the early 90's. Martin and Tony, two great men from my childhood, loved me and looked out for me as their own child. These are the type of men that our community needs, despite one of them being a big time drug dealer, they both were instrumental in shaping my life by instilling the great qualities that they possessed.

— Benny Rios