'César Chávez Saved My Life'

by Nane Alejandrez

Nane Alejandrez had plenty of opportunities to die. Instead he chose life, and brought generations of Latino youngsters with him.

by Rose Marie Berger

Daniel "Nane" Alejandrez, founder of the national urban peace organization Barrios Unidos, has spent his whole life in mortal combat with the gangs, drugs, and poverty in Latino communities. The weapons he wields are no longer guns and blades, but words, spiritual conviction, culture, art, and the rare courage of "being there" with and for kids on the edge. Since its start in 1977, Barrios Unidos has worked with thousands of youth in gang culture. BU also operates the César E. Chávez School for Social Change, an alternative high school in Santa Cruz, California; BU Productions, a professional silk-screening micro-enterprise providing jobs and business training; and the Community Technology and Resource Center, a computer training and job skills center. In 2005, BU received the Letelier-Moffitt Human Rights Award.

Alejandrez, who has lost 14 family members-including two brothers-to what he calls "the madness of inner-city America," is also co-chair of the Urban Peace and Justice Summit, the national organization that works to forge truces between African-American and Latino gangs. As Latino incarceration rates in the U.S. have soared, Alejandrez and Barrios Unidos have also turned their attention to decreasing the incarceration and recidivism rates of those at risk. This is his story, as told to Sojourners associate editor Rose Marie Berger in October 2005.

I'm the son of migrant farm workers, born out in a cotton field in Merigold, Mississippi. My family's from Texas. A migrant child goes to five or six different schools in one year, and you try to assimilate to whatever's going on at that time. I grew up not having shoes or only having one pair of pants to wear to school all week. I always remembered my experience in Texas, where Mexicans and blacks couldn't go to certain restaurants. That leaves something in you.

I saw how my father would react when Immigration would come up to the fields or the boss man talked to him. I would see my father bow his head. I didn't know why my father wasn't standing up to this man. As a

child working in the rows behind him, I said to myself, "I'll never do that." A deep anger was developing in me.

But it was also developing in my father; the way that he dealt with it was alcohol. He would become violent when he drank on the weekends. I realized later that the reason he would bow his head to the boss is that he had seven kids to feed. He took that humiliation in order to feed me.

I STABBED THE first kid when I was 13 years old. I shot another guy when I was 15. I almost killed a guy when I was 17. On and on and on. Then, in the late 1960s, I found myself as a young man in the Vietnam War. I saw more violence, inflicted more violence, and then tried to deal with the violence.

I came back from the war addicted to heroin, as many, many young men did. I came back to the street war, in the drug culture. Suddenly there were farm workers-who lost jobs because of the bringing of machines into the fields-who turned into drug dealers; it's easier money.

But when I was still working in the fields, something happened. I was 17 years old, out in the fields of central California, and suddenly I hear this voice coming out of the radio, talking about how we must better our conditions and better our lives in the migrant camps. It was like this voice was talking just to me.

The voice was César Chávez. He said, "You must organize. You must seek justice. You must ask for better wages." It's 1967. I'm busting my ass off pitching melons with six guys. Because we're the youngest, they put us on the hardest job, but we're getting paid $1.65 an hour. The guys working the harvesting machines are making $8 an hour. We said to ourselves, "Something's not right."

Having the words of César Chávez, I organized the young men and called a strike. After lunch we just stopped working. We didn't go back on the fields. This was sort of a hard thing because my father was a foreman to this contractor, so I was going against him. He was concerned that we were rocking the boat-but I think he was proud of me. We shut down three of the melon machines, which forced the contractor to come, and then the landowner came. "What's going on?" he said. We said, "We're on strike, because we aren't getting our money." After about two hours, they said, "Okay, we're going to raise it to $1.95."

But it wasn't the $1.95-it was the fact that six young men were being abused, and that this little short Indian guy, César Chávez, had an influence. I kept his words.

When I wound up in Vietnam, I heard about Martin Luther King and his stand against the war. Somebody also told me about Mahatma Gandhi. I didn't know who he was, only that he was a bald-headed dude that had done this kind of stuff. In Vietnam I realized that there were people that I had never met before, that had never done nothing to me, never called me a dirty Mexican or a greaser or nothing, and all of sudden I had to be an enemy to them.

I started looking at the words of César Chávez in terms of nonviolence. I looked at the violence in the community, in the fields, yet Chávez was still calling for peace.

IT HAS BEEN an incredible journey since those days. For us this is a spiritual movement. In Barrios Unidos, that's the primary thing-our spirit comes first. How do we take care of ourselves? Whatever people believe in, no matter what faith or religion, how do we communicate to the youngsters who are spiritually bankrupt? Many of us were addicted to drugs or alcohol, and we have to find a spiritual connection. Working with gang members, there's a lot of pain, so you have to find ways for healing. As peacemakers, we are wounded peacemakers.

This work has taken us into the prisons. Throughout the years, we've been talking about the high rate of incarceration among our people, and the drug laws. Many people are doing huge amounts of time for nonviolent drug convictions; they did not need to be incarcerated-they need treatment. Currently in this country we deal with treatment by incarcerating people, which leads them to more violence and more negative ways of living.

As community-based organizations, we have had to prove to the correctional institutions that we're not in there to create any revolution. We're there to try to help. I'm asking how I can change the men that have been violent. How do I help change their attitude toward society and toward their own relatives? We see them as our relatives-these are our relatives that are incarcerated. How can we support them?

We go into the prison as a cultural and spiritual group helping men in prison to understand their own culture and those of different cultures. They come from great warrior societies. But the warrior tradition doesn't just mean going to war, but also fighting for peace. The prisoners who help organize the Cinco de Mayo, Juneteenth, and Native powwow ceremonies within the prison system are a true testament of courage to change the madness of violence that has unnecessarily claimed many lives. By providing those ceremonies, we allow them to see who they really are. They weren't born gang members, or drug addicts, or thieves.

My best example of hope in the prisons is when we take the Aztec dancers into the institutions. They do a whole indigenous ceremony. At the end, they invite people to what's called a friendship dance. It's a big figure-eight dance. The first time that we were in prison in Tracy, California, out on the yard, there were 2,000 men out there. The ceremony was led by Laura Castro, founder of the Xochut Aztec dance group, a very petite woman, very keen to her culture. She says to me, "What do you think, Nane? Do you think that these guys will come out and dance?" I'm looking at those guys-tattoos all over them and swastikas and black dudes that are really big. It's incredible to be in the prison yard. I say to her, "I don't know."

But what ties all those guys together is the drumbeat. Every culture has some ceremonial drum you play. When the drumbeat started in the yard, the men just started coming. They divide themselves by race and then by gang. You got Norteños, Sureños, Hispanos, blacks, whites, Indians, and then "others" (mostly the Asian guys).

When the men were invited into the dance, those guys emptied out the bleachers. They came. They held hands. This tiny woman, Laura, led them through the ceremony of the friendship dance. They went round and round. There were black, white, and brown holding hands, which doesn't happen in prison. And they were laughing. For a few seconds, maybe a minute, there was hope. We saw the smiles of men being children, remembering something about their culture. The COs [correctional officers] came out of the tower wondering what the hell was going on with these men dancing in prison, holding hands. It was an incredible sight. That day, the Creator was present. I knew that God's presence was there. Everyone was given a feeling that something had happened that wasn't our doing.