

BERTHA MERAZ

My name is Bertha Meraz. I have lived in LA County for all my life – 78 years.

'It was like a warzone.'

I have three sons. My youngest son, Mark Anthony Meraz, was murdered October 2, 1991. Before that, we had three years of hate crimes. They would come from the next block through the alley and shoot at our house. We had 18 drive-bys, three Molotov cocktails, beating up on my husband, chasing my sons. I chased them one time because I was so upset. They ran.

October 2, we were buying a house to get out of Artesia and move to Hawaiian Gardens. At 4:30 p.m., we signed the papers to buy the house. At 7:45 p.m., they came in – four of them. They went by the front of the house then they backed up and went through the alley, stopped and four got out [of a Jeep]. It happened that Mark, his brother Richard – my middle son – and two friends were standing in front of the house. When they saw that the Jeep backed up, they started to run. Because of the violence that we had already had, we had the car parked right in front of the house on the lawn. Richard snuck by the tire. Mark tried to run but the bullet caught him as he ran, and it got his arm. It went through and disintegrated his heart.

We went into the front room and I'm trying and trying to get the police and ambulance. Our phones were not working. I ran from the front room to the bedroom, back and forth. They were not working. [Mark] came in and he collapsed. Finally, I got somebody to come, and they were still shooting. They shot more than 40 rounds at the house. It was like a warzone. During the time that they were shooting, I could see the glare of the bullets coming out of the guns. Finally, the ambulance came. They took [Mark] but they said his breathing was very shallow. We got to the hospital. He was still barely breathing. He didn't make it.

'We were targeted.'

The next day everybody came to pay their condolences. We had the mayor of Hawaiian Gardens there. And here comes two cars of gang members showing guns, not saying anything, just showing guns. The mayor called the police and said, "Why isn't somebody here protecting this family after everything that they've gone through?" But the police didn't seem to be wanting to do too much because they already knew that Hawaiian Gardens and Artesia did not get along. This is years and decades. They have never gotten along. We were targeted because our family lived [in Artesia] and we would go every weekend to Hawaiian

Gardens to visit my family, my mother-in-law, aunts, everybody. They assumed that because my sons were coming with us that they were in the gang, which was not true. They were not in any gangs. They were not.

We called [police] every time. I mean, this was happening like every week that they would pass by and say something or do something. I tell you – it was 18 drive-by shootings! We lived in Artesia 25 years. My kids went to school with some of these [gang members]. They didn't care. It was already assumed that we were going to be goners. They didn't want us there at all, not even to live. It was that same day that we sold the house. The gang didn't even know that we had bought the house in Hawaiian Gardens. My sons didn't know. I hadn't even told them. We hadn't even gotten to the point of telling them we signed the papers. We were really excited. We thought, *okay, Mark is going to bring his girlfriend. We're all going to have dinner together.* It was not meant to be. We didn't even get a chance to tell my sons. [Mark] never even knew he was moving. He never knew we were getting another house.

Police would come and they just, “Now what? What gang are you in?” My husband would ask, “Why are you asking what gang they’re in? They’re not in any gang.” “Well, they have short haircuts.” Another officer followed [the first officer] after he had said that. He says, “What's going on?” My husband says, “They're saying that we're gang members because we have short hair.” [This officer] took off his hat and he goes, “So am I in a gang? I have short hair.” But some of them won't even get out of their cars. They didn't want to be bothered. They figured Artesia and Hawaiian Gardens will shoot and kill each other and that's it. For as many times as we call them, sometimes they wouldn't even show up.

‘They started shooting him.’

Five months later, my middle son was shot and paralyzed for the rest of his life. The same gang members. My son was in the garage. His cousin came over and they said, “We're going to be in the garage.” I said, “Okay.” I left it at that and went to sleep. It was like maybe 2 a.m. that I got a phone call from my brother-in-law. He just said, “Comadre, Richard’s been shot but he's okay.” “How could he be shot? He's in the garage.” He said, “No, they came to my house. They walked to the house. Richard wanted to go home, but nobody was willing to take him home. So, he started walking.” He got one block away from their house. When he seen the car come up, they asked him right away, “Where are you from?” When he turned, the blanket in the backseat started to move. They started shooting him. They hit him in the arm. They hit him in the hip and in the leg. The hip one, when he was turning, it hit the vertebrae, left fragments all over, and the bullet is lodged an inch from his spine. The other one broke his leg. He's had many, many surgeries from that because they put in a bar – stainless steel – but then they had to put titanium because it broke. He's gone through countless surgeries. Richard was 23 at the time that he got shot. Mark was 21.

We wanted protection, thinking that protection would help. There's still one [shooter] that's left in jail. The other two have already been released. There was a fourth one that had shot at the house that night and, two weeks later, he got shot by somebody in Norwalk and passed away.

I knew gangs were happening around me. But I think you feel like you're in that dome, you think that nothing's going to happen to you until it does. We kind of became part of the gang situation ourselves because of the fear. We took turns on the roof with a gun in case they came by. That's how we had to put ourselves low like them. Fortunately, nobody ever came around, but we would take shifts to protect ourselves and our family. The police did tell us off record, "You need to protect yourself. We can't always be here." Even when they came, what good did they do?

'God carried me on his back.'

March 1 is when Richard was shot, March 27 is when the baby was born to my murdered son, Mark. Then in August, my mom passed away. In 10 months, I had dealt with all that. Then two-and-a-half years after that, my dad passed away. God carried me on his back. That's all I can say. Thank God, he gave me another day. I also know that [Mark] would be saying, "You have to go on. You have to take care of my son." That's probably another phase of what I'm going through is to help people. Knowing that it has been this many years, that I am a little bit strong, because He gives me the strength to keep going and to help other people. Maybe that is what my calling is right now.

I went through stages of different things. I hated God because he was supposed to protect my family and He wasn't there at the time. My son, the bullet went through his heart. Two weeks later, I heard on the news that there was this little girl who had also been shot in the heart. But they did surgery and they saved her. *Why couldn't that have happened to my son?* I blame God. But then after I had a feeling that things happen for a reason. Maybe something else was going to happen to him or he was going to be a vegetable. If he would have been not able to function, I don't think he would have wanted to live. Who knows why things happen, but they do. I think at that point, I knew that God had taken my son, but he gave me a grandson who's carrying the name and looks exactly like him, then maybe I'm supposed to raise my son all over again. The trauma of his dad being murdered has followed my grandson, some that I am unable to change. I keep in touch with him as much as I can.

'I do live in fear of what could happen.'

I went to the parole hearing in March of this year to see if they were going to release the [gang member] who had put the hit on us. He mentioned my grandson. He said he had talked to somebody. But did he show remorse? No. After 30 years of denying any part of it, he finally said, “I’m the one who put the hit on them.” They patted him on the back and said, “Good boy, now you get paroled.”

I kind of let it go for a while knowing that they were in jail. But now that this one was released, I am fearful. I am fearful not knowing whether he's going to do something else now that he's out, knows where we live, whether he's going to do something again. Not knowing if he's going to get in contact with somebody else or want to come and do something more to us because he had to do time. I do live in fear of what could happen.

I don't have answers.'

Artesia and Hawaiian Gardens have been battling it out since the '50s. It has been an ongoing thing. Last Sunday, there was another shooting. I get a call last night from somebody who asked if I know somebody the mother could talk with, to get some help. I said, “If she's willing, I will meet with her and let her know that she can go on. It takes time, but she can go on. If she needs to, she can talk to me at any time.” I tell everybody, “I don't care if it's midnight. If you need to talk to somebody, call me.” I don't have answers. But I'm a listener.

Six months before Mark passed away, there was a lady on TV all the time. Her son was murdered, simply because somebody asked him to give him a ride and Artesia seen that guy in the car. They shot the car, didn't hit the [passenger] from Hawaiian Gardens, but killed her son and he wrecked the car. She would always stand on the corner, on 221st and Norwalk, for months and months. Every anniversary, she would come. She would try to get any information that she could. She sent me a letter and a card of sympathy [saying] that if only they had caught the ones who murdered her son, my son would be alive. I felt compelled to go and see her.

I met with the family. She told me she was in a bereavement group in Los Alamitos. It was only bereavement for parents who had lost children. I started going with her and then went six years. Every story was a little bit different, but we were all in the same boat. We had all lost a child. I kept up with it until I thought, *okay, I think I can maneuver the waters a little bit by myself*. I think it helped me to be able to help people. To tell them that you go through so many different stages of hurt, of anger, of depression. Some days you can get up in the morning and you feel like, *okay, I can go today*, and then an hour later, *no, I can't*.

Knowing that my other sons were having grandchildren, that helped me. My oldest grandchild – she's 34 – from my oldest son. My middle son, he had four children – two boys and two girls. I have grandchildren, but I don't have any daughters-in-law. But it's okay, we all get along. I see the kids all the

time and I've got eight grandchildren and six great-grandkids. God has graced me to keep going on for them.

'I was grasping for straws.'

[When Mark was murdered], I was grasping for straws, not knowing, not ever thinking any of this was going to happen in my family. Then living in the fear of what we had to do, that the police should have been more aware. If I had already called five times and it's still going on, get more people out there, more officers to patrol, to be aware of what's going on and not to throw it under the rug and say, "There's another one that's dead." Have a little bit more heart, a little bit more compassion. Get more workers out to assist the people once this has happened. Once it's happened, I did have a lady [from the County] talk with me, but it was just once. You need the support from people and even to negotiate through arranging a funeral and things.

The biggest thing is to destroy all guns. If there weren't any guns, you could throw rocks at each other; it's not going to hurt them like this. If there were no guns, there wouldn't be all this. A gun doesn't go off by itself. If there's a gun in the house, whether they're depressed, they can use it; whether they're angry, they can use it. If they don't have it locked up, a child can get a hold of it. We need a lot more to be done for the gun violence itself to be demolished. We need to be out there and making everybody aware of what's going on and the anger that we feel.

'I think we can do more.'

This boy was shot a couple of weeks ago. He had been in prison and recently got out, only to be murdered. Some days, I see things going so good. But when I hear something like this boy being shot or somebody's being chased here in Hawaiian Gardens, then I feel like, *where's the help we need? Are we doing enough?* Our motto here is "Our youth, our future." If we don't have our youth, where is the future? I think we can do more.

At least my voice can help with that. It's making a difference in that person's life. That's what I'm striving for. If people don't talk about their feelings, you can only hold so much in before you blow one way or the other. I'm happy to do this, even though it's horrible. Hopefully it helps with other families.

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