

JUAN GARIBAY

My name is Juan Garibay. I have lived in LA County pretty much my whole life – 51 years. I came to the U.S. when I was six years old, from Mexico, Guadalajara. That's originally where I was born. I've been here since 1979. I grew up in the San Fernando Valley, in Pacoima. Now I live in Lomita.

'The gangs made me feel I belonged.'

I was shot due to gang affiliations on August 28, 1993. I had just six weeks coming out of prison – my first time – for burglary. I went in at age 18 and came out around 20 years old. I ran into four guys that were driving down the street that I was walking on toward my neighborhood. I thought that we were going to fight, but it wasn't the case. I was shot with a .22 rifle right in the spinal cord that left me paralyzed from the waist down.

It was part of life at that time. Being shot or winding up in prison, those are the things that come when you choose to join a gang. It felt like that was really the only option I had at that time. I have two siblings who are younger than me. My parents, they definitely loved me, but it wasn't the supporting kind of love. It was never the support that I needed to pursue something better than what was in front of me. Their mindset was more how to survive. I was very rebellious against my father. My father and I had a very tumultuous relationship because we were different generations. He was old school Mexicano – “My way or the highway.” We fought a lot. I think that was one of the main reasons why I chose the streets over family. The gangs made me feel like I belonged. They made me feel like I was worth it, like I was perfect the way that I was at that time. Being raised in that part of Pacoima where there were a lot of gangs, it was a safety net for me to belong to something, to feel protected from other gangs that I was having issues with, as I was getting into my teenage years.

Crack cocaine was also pretty big. The crack cocaine scene had just come into our lives, as far as seeing the drug dealers making this kind of crazy money. It was everywhere around us at the time. You couldn't compete with the kind of money that you were able to make as a teenager selling drugs and selling raw cocaine. It was hard to beat that temptation. It spiraled out of control from there. The more you did, the more you got involved, the deeper you went into that lifestyle. People older than us started around our age selling drugs and eventually wind up getting hooked. At that time, we saw that around us a lot. It was an eye opener to not be like that, to avoid that kind of slip up. For us, it was more marijuana, cigarettes, or alcohol. It was more focused on trying to survive, to have money to party and have a comfortable lifestyle. As a teenager, you're just making sure you have money in your pocket to do the things that you want to do with your friends.

Our neighborhood was kind of small; it was most of us kids that went to junior high together and kind of bonded over our school experience. I was one of the first ones from that circle of friends that went to prison. I was definitely somebody the younger homeboys listened to because of going to prison. It did give me a lot of credibility as somebody who was down for the neighborhood and was willing to do whatever was necessary to protect the neighborhood. [After prison], I was actually more into my gang culture, that kind of mentality of trying to run our gang to some extent. I was driven in the sense of respect and making some of the calls for the neighborhood.

'It's not going to be the same.'

We were beefing with another gang in the Valley and we're going back and forth shooting at each other. It happened that Saturday night, August 28, 1993, they caught me slipping. I was walking through my neighborhood. I was going to meet up with a girl that night. It was probably around 8:20 p.m. It was a nice summer night, just going about my business. This car is coming toward me. The car stopped and I stopped, and we looked at each other. We threw gang signs at each other, and the car kept driving past me, so I kept walking not realizing they had turned around. That's when they shot me. I remember laying on the ground for a minute looking at the sky, looking at the stars and how clear everything was that night. Thinking, *maybe these guys are going to finish me off right here*. I couldn't move. I didn't realize I was paralyzed in that moment. When I did try to get up, I had this sharp pain in my kidney that led me back down. I'm like, *won, this is it*. But it wasn't the case.

I remember this guy from across the street where I was laying. He came out kind of scared himself. He didn't want to get shot. He didn't want to be caught up in something. I remember yelling at him, "Hey, can you help me?" He said, "No, I can't help you. But don't worry. The ambulance is on their way. I called them." They do surgery on me to repair my kidney and liver because the bullet ricocheted in my body. It collapsed my lungs, my liver, and my kidneys. A few days later, coming out of surgery and recovering, my doctor told me that I was paralyzed from the waist down and that I was going to be transferred to Rancho Los Amigos hospital for rehabilitation, which was in Downey. At that time, I didn't know where Downey was. I didn't know what Rancho was. I didn't know it was a hospital. I thought it was a ranch. It didn't hit me, the weight of being paralyzed, of not being able to use my legs again.

It hit me when I got a home pass. When I got transferred to Rancho Los Amigos hospital and started working on my rehabilitation, I was learning how to adapt to a wheelchair and doing things from a wheelchair point of view. I remember getting a pass and asking to go home, to get the feeling of how that was going to be with a disability now. I remember all I cared about for that home pass was to go back to my neighborhood. To go home and try and look as fresh as possible and get back to my neighborhood, which I

did. I think that's when it kind of hit me – *I'm actually paralyzed*. I couldn't do the things that I was able to do prior to that. Hanging out with my homeboys and being treated a little bit differently because of that. They show a lot of love and respect, but you're in a wheelchair now. It's not going to be the same.

'This lifestyle for me is over.'

I got home in November right before Thanksgiving of '93. When I came back home, I tried to go back into that lifestyle. I went to prison for selling drugs. I got my house raided. I did almost three years of that. Going to prison being wheelchair bound was an eye opener for me. That was the wake-up call that this lifestyle for me is over. It wasn't the same anymore. The first time I went to prison, I was able to do things, get involved. But it wasn't like that when I went back in. That was a wake-up call, to realize that this is the lowest you could go. *You've been shot, you're paralyzed and you're back in prison now*. I asked myself mentally, *what do you want to do? How do you want to live the rest of your life?*

I had a girlfriend and she stood by me during that time that I was in prison. I moved in with her once I got out of prison at the end of '98. By '99, I got a scholarship to work at Rancho Los Amigos in the rehabilitation engineering department. My life changed ever since. I've been here almost 26 years, working at Rancho Los Amigos Research Institute. I was very shy when I first started because I felt out of place coming out of prison. I was surrounded by people that were very highly educated, with degrees and all that kind of stuff. It must have taken me a year to get a little bit comfortable. I started speaking up and having my thoughts and my opinions heard and respected. That was the kind of therapy that I got without actually talking to a psychologist, being able to learn from the people I was working with, having these opportunities, and learning how to take advantage of those opportunities in the right way to have a better quality of life. I've been exposed to many people that have been big factors to changing my life around. They gave me the opportunities, the lessons that I needed to be able to change myself.

'I was worth loving myself.'

I started speaking as a survivor in May 2002. We go out into the middle schools, mainly in Compton, to talk about rehabilitation engineering as a career option. Rehabilitation engineering is basically coming up with new devices that improve people's quality of life when you deal with a disability. That was an opportunity for me to talk about what happened. It was a blessing in disguise to be able to share stories with the younger crowd. I was once them, growing up and not knowing that you're worth everything. That you're entitled to have a good quality of life. That it's very possible if you take the right steps necessary. Those steps are usually very clear, but they tend to get muddled by the things that we surround ourselves

with, the negativity around us. When you're able to get past that, you come to the realization, *I was worth it all this time. I was worth loving myself. I was worth having people love me for who I was and who I am and the potential that I had or still have.* It's important to share that with the younger crowd, so they don't have to fall in the same path and maybe they can have a better life.

Investing more on programs that serve the inner city, the County needs to continue that support and not waver from that. We know that violence will usually spike up around the summertime when kids get out of school. Supporting job programs that offer opportunities for kids to learn about the responsibility of earning a paycheck, learning how to put a resume together, job training opportunities, exposing them to different kinds of fields and careers. It's an important thing because that will stay with them. In junior high, I think that's where kids start to identify themselves. They're trying to find who they are. Try to capture them at that age. My physical therapist when I was [at Rancho], her kids were raised in a wealthy area. They had all of these great opportunities from junior high all the way to high school for them to pursue different careers. Being exposed to different careers during that time they were going to school. If we could copy that blueprint and bring it into the inner city also, then you will see the same outcomes – higher graduation rates, crime being less prevalent, having kids not join gangs – because they realize there's more to life than what they're being exposed to. Having programs that are funded for long term is very helpful because you will be able to see the transformation from sixth grade all the way to high school. It can be done. We have to have the County carve out funding for these kinds of programs to be able to do longitudinal tests or studies with some of these kids to show that these services do work. And they do.

I'm still here.'

I was kicked out of high school the second week in 10th grade because of gang fights. I got my GED when I was in prison. I never thought about college. I never thought about that kind of life because, back in those days, I never thought that it was for me. People that I was exposed to were not graduating, were not going to university, were not people that were going to get PhDs. They were hardcore gang members that were running the neighborhood. People that were selling drugs and making big money. Those were our role models at that time. That's who we wanted to be when we got older and is why we made certain choices. We were pursuing the path that was shown to us by the older men that we looked up to.

I've been lucky enough to survive in this nonprofit world, learning how to manage and run programs from the beginning to the end. It's been beautiful.

On top of that, I have a daughter with three grandkids. My daughter is 29 years old. I have a 13-year-old, 5-year-old, and a two-month-old granddaughter. I'm making sure that they don't follow in those footsteps of feeling like they have to find love and seek love somewhere. I'm like, "I love you guys. Let me

try to be the best version of myself so you can learn how to be the best version for yourselves.”

‘Your life is starting again.’

I'm the Program Manager for the Rancho Violence Recovery and Prevention Program. It's a nonprofit that we have. We work with a lot of survivors of violence to take advantage of the services and talk to a psychologist to process some of these feelings that you're having, the negativity, the doubts that you have.

It's like you have a second opportunity to live the kind of life you might have wanted to live in the first place, but never got the chance for whatever reason. You have an opportunity to try to rebuild and have a better quality of life, not just for yourself, but also for your family. When this happened to me, my younger brother was part of the gang that I was involved in. When I made this transformation, my brother did the same. My brother works for the city now and has a good job. That trickles down to our family and to our kids and all that.

I remember this gentleman sharing his story after we'd worked together for a few months. “When I first got paralyzed, I told my mother my life is over. There's nothing after this. Then I remember you rolling in, you're looking fresh and that gave me hope. When I started getting to know you and working with you and the way that you were able to transform your life, that inspired me to do the same. To realize, life is different, but life still goes on.” That was a beautiful thing to hear. Then another gentleman not too long ago, I ran into him at Rancho in the courtyard. He's been injured 22 years and we have probably crossed paths, but we never paid attention to each other. But he stopped me and let me know, “I'm proud to know you. When I first got hurt, like 20-something years ago, you were a different person. Seeing who you have become now is inspiring because it gives people hope. People who look like us. We make tough choices. We learn to deal with those consequences, but we can make better choices moving forward.”

Those things are inspiring. Not because it's about me, but it's the bridge that we're talking about, bridging that gap of hope, and improving your quality of life that is very possible. It's all about mindset and perspective and how you go about looking at your new life. You can look at it as the end or you can look at it as a new beginning.

Recorded at:
Los Angeles County, CA
07/03/24
10:00 am

