

## SERAFIN SERRANO

My name is Serafin Serrano. I was pretty much raised in LA. I have been living here in Long Beach a little over two years.

*‘My three brothers were shot that day.’*

We were four [brothers]. We grew up in Venice, California in the ‘70s. We grew up in a home where there was violence, as well as a community where there was violence. All my brothers have been shot. I was stabbed. We went from being – and I feel I could speak for the males in my family – scared, terrified children in the home to subsequently scaring and terrifying others in the community. Of course, that was kind of a gradual process.

On December 14, 1986, my brother Theodore was shot in the head. Several hours later, his heart stopped beating. I was a teenager at the time. While I have several brothers, he was my mother; he was my father. He was my teacher; he was my mentor. He taught me how to swim. He taught me how to ride a bike. We were children living in Venice; we'd go to the ocean. We'd go and catch crabs. Most of all, he downloaded love. He injected tenderness and softness and warmth.

He was 19. That had been already the fourth time he had been shot. So, violence, unfortunately, was not anything out of the ordinary for us. We were very intimately acquainted with violence. Nonetheless, there was a shock factor. I recall specifically getting the news. A police officer came to the house and said to contact the hospital. We didn't have a phone or landline at that time. I got on my bicycle – I was 14 – and I rode over to the public phone, and I contacted the hospital. The first thing they asked me was, “How old are you?” I immediately knew if I told them my age, they would not give me information. I answered, “18.” They said they were sorry to tell me that my brother Theodore did not make it and that my brother Tony was in critical condition. My three brothers were shot that day.

It's been so many years, but I have a vivid recollection of it. I went home and remember opening the door. Before I even said anything, my mother looked at me and fell to the floor wailing. I can't recall exactly what the time was from December 14 to his services, but I did notice that I wouldn't cry. I saw everybody around me crying. I'm young and, as I mentioned, my brother was my go-to person. Naturally, everybody in the home was going through their own individual shock and grief, but I remember considering why I wasn't able to cry. The night of his services, when I saw my brother in the casket, all the grief, all the loss poured out of me. I cried and cried and cried and cried.

*'It added to my fury.'*

That hurt shifted into fury, into rage. We were already deeply hurting others and cycling hurt. Soon after that, [one of] my brothers took a life and fled. I was arrested with a weapon, and I went away for several years to California Youth Authority. I'm still young; I'm a teenager. I recall being shackled up in the court, in juvenile hall, fighting a lot. All these things being written about the "monster," the "gangster" that I was. It added to my fury. While at the California Youth Authority and youth training school (a facility in Chino), they would have violent offenders participate in an anger management program. In this program, I was there with a lot of my peers from different communities with almost identical backgrounds, familiarity with violence, cycling violence.

What I remember most about participating in this anger management program is how ridiculous I felt it was. There was a doctor conducting it. At this time, I didn't know what it entailed to have a PhD, to be a doctor. I remember feeling it was a complete waste of my time. But I had to be there. Once you were sentenced to the California Youth Authority, you were property of the state. You had to go to a parole board hearing, and they would decide when you were rehabilitated, when you were no longer a danger to the community, and you would be granted parole. The psychologist wrote the report that would go in front of the parole board. Again, I remember being in that class thinking it was a complete waste of time, which added to my fury.

However, it was also in that space that I had my first radical idea. I thought to myself, *I can do something that he's doing but I want to make it meaningful*. I don't know what that meant. Again, I don't even know what all he took to get where he's at. At that point, I realized that [my] purpose was born. I paroled in 1992 and I had this idea of going into a field where I can work with others, specifically young people, young men. I discharged from parole two years later and I began volunteering with the probation department. I would go to juvenile hall and connect with other young people.

*'I know that we need each other.'*

When my brother was killed, him and his girlfriend were two months pregnant. On July 13, 1987, his only son was born. Once I was stable and I had my own apartment living in Orange County, working in the field – I was working in a nonprofit as a youth counselor interventionist – I was able to get custody of my nephew. My nephew was 12 years old; he was in middle school. I had the luxury and the privilege of passing on all that love that his dad gave me. I was able to shower and rain on his son, his only son.

On December 15, 2020, a week after being released from jail, my nephew, my brother's only son, was murdered at the hands of [police]. The significant difference is that when I was a teenager and my

brother was murdered, I felt alone. When I lost my nephew almost four years ago, I'd already been in this place of privilege, this place connected to others. This place where I know that we need each other, that community heals community.

I don't use the word "gang." Days after my brother was killed, I remember somebody going to the house and the first question they asked, "Was your brother a gang member?" Again, I'm a teenager, so I'm naive on so many different forms. But there was something about that question that offended me to my core. I understand now why. Because love is love. We belong to each other. No one is as bad as the worst thing that they've done. That anybody joining, going into that lifestyle, is already someone signaling and crying for attention and our love.

*'We're either cycling hurt or we're cycling love.'*

I think one of the beautiful qualities of my brother, that I suspect that all of us feel, is that we were specially loved by him. I'm convinced I was his favorite. I'm convinced. When I had the opportunity of raising his son, I realized it's almost as if he loved me so much so that I can care for his only son when the day came. All these years later, including following the death of his son, I'm convinced that we're really only circulating love or we're circulating pain. I had the luxury of already understanding that at a heart and a soul level when his only son was killed.

You hear me continuing to use the expressions privilege and luxury. When I say I feel privileged, I mean that I have the privilege of knowing that I'm loved, that I am not alone. I have a sea of loving friends and colleagues. It's our nature. Because we're either cycling hurt or we're cycling love. In 1995, I wouldn't have told you that I was going in there loving on young people. I wouldn't use that language. To this day, depending on where you're at, you got to watch your language. Other people want to hear "programming," "rehabilitative services", yada, yada, yada. It's love. Call it what you want, it's love. Love is a felt sense. My brother's love that he bestowed on me didn't come from no handbook. It didn't come from no training. He was circulating the love he received.

In the last several years it dawned on me, we all have the same father and mother. We just had very distinctive early childhood experiences. My brothers were all raised by my grandmother and my aunts and an uncle. He was cycling the love our grandmother and our aunts rained on him. What I learned over the decades is that love outlasts life.

Following my nephew's death almost four years ago, I noticed the intensity and the ferocity in which I love now. If I wasn't already familiar with our mortality, my nephew reminded me that we're here for but a blink of an eye. This is what I mean by privilege. What I am convinced of is the love that I received from my brother, that he received from my grandma, I'm now able to circulate. I'm convinced those that are in

the peripheral, they're in my sphere of love. I'm convinced that with that inoculation of love, should they go into law enforcement, they would be [so] connected to their heart, that they would never be so removed from their own humanness that they can choke another living person's breath away. I'm convinced of that. This already happens. It's not some way off the wall philosophy. I've already seen that cycle of love perpetuate.

*Incarceration is not the solution.'*

I feel it's important and necessary to invest in communities. Invest in families, invest in children and early education. Whether that be intervention, whether that be prevention – everything intersects. Being out here in the arena going on three decades, I see now more than ever cycles of immense hurt. Incarceration is not the solution. We can't incarcerate healing; we can invest in healing. We can invest in communities, in children and supporting strained families that are carrying generational grief. In many respects, I feel it's very basic about being proactive, about allotting the necessary resources, the funding in community, so that we're not only reacting to generations of hurt.

We can't punish the punished. We did that in the '90s with the draconian laws that we're now dealing with the residuals of. I've been out in community. Young people whose parents are serving life sentences are soothing themselves with addiction, with drugs, soothing themselves from their hurt. Tap survivors, tap impacted communities, recognize that they're the gems. They're the ones that are most familiar with these antidotes or with these forms of building and healing our community. Not being reactive but being proactive.

I feel strongly in the African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child." I feel any investment in deepening and equipping practitioners – that can include educators, that can include social workers, that can include anybody that is connected with children, with families, with communities – with not solely the tools, but the spaces to begin to thaw and unpack and transmute harm and hurt and trauma. There's some work being done there, but I feel that will have an immediate impact.

Once again, cycling love. Otherwise, as well intentioned as we can be, as wonderful, elaborate, well-written proposals and so-called programming are, they're only as viable and healthy as what practitioners are providing with their presence. I've heard it said this way, "Our energy introduces us before we even speak." Invest in our own collective community, to those that are out providing, so that they can be their best and show up for families that have been experiencing a legacy of hurt. That begins to circulate love and that furthers our generational healing process.

*'This is a healing moment.'*

I've been loving with more intensity and more intentionality following my nephew's death. Since then, randomly, there'll be intervals of grief. There'll be intervals of sorrow. Last October, I remember seeing children with Michael Myers costumes around Halloween. It reminded me that my nephew for several years was Michael Myers. I'm not sure I even had to buy him a new costume. It was the same mask with this knife, and we have photos of him with my daughter and his cousins. He was always Michael Myers. I remember I am driving home and seeing these Michael Myers kids. I remember beginning to weep. I realized the double-edged sword of being in the arena is also affording myself space to grieve. I've only been loving more since my nephew's loss.

Our ancestor, bell hooks, informed us that we don't heal in isolation, that we need one another. This is an opportunity to honor my bro, to honor my nephew. This is a healing moment. I encourage people to allow themselves to feel the grief, the shock, the anguish. To allow themselves to be loved, to allow themselves to fall apart. I've come to respect death as a continuum. When my brother died, a piece of me died. I'm around a lot of grief. One of my mentees was just murdered. His services are in a couple of days. I'm looking forward to being in that sorrow with the family.

Healing is about feeling that grief. We need one another and to trust our intuition on when we feel cared for. We need to remember that we're not alone. It's okay to feel all that we feel.

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