

Gang members describe lives

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Five incarcerated gang members have troubled family lives, histories of drug use and need to belong to a group.

Anibal Izara, 19; Elmer Hernandez, 18; Elmer Iraheta, 20; Donald Filkin Jr., 18; and Juan Nava, 16; are Hall County Jail inmates awaiting sentencing or pending felonies.

The men don't lead lifestyles worth copying and admit they would like to leave gangs or keep their siblings from joining them.

All joined gangs as young teens. Most said gangs aren't present in Grand Island, even though they named specific groups here.

All were "jumped" during gang initiations in which "friends" assaulted them, leaving bloody noses, swollen lips and black eyes as mementos. None are high school graduates. The five have used marijuana, methamphetamine or cocaine.

Why do people join gangs?

"A lot of them are from families that are having a lot of problems," said Dave Reed, shelter coordinator for Boys Town Mid-Plains Shelter, which is just outside Grand Island.

"They want some type of nurturing, structured environment. They want something the gang is providing them."

Addictions may be involved or thrills such as shoplifting, stealing or weapons.

Why can't they leave?

"They say it's their family, and that's the reason they have a hard time leaving it," Reed said.

Izara said he's a "gangster" from California.

"Here, there are no gangs," he said.

"Sometimes, they try to kill me," Izara said. "That's why I'm in a gang." His gang has "a lot of fun." Drugs, drinking and "a lot of women" are among activities.

Izara has three sisters and three brothers. He attended school for 10 years. He was born in Guatemala, where his parents still operate a grocery store. He came to the United States nine years ago with a brother, settling in Los Angeles. He lived with an uncle and joined a gang there six years ago.

"They tried to kill me. That's why I moved here," he said. "If I get out (of jail), I want to change my life. I want to go back to my country and not come back to the United States."

Izara joined his family in Nebraska two years ago and worked at packing plants in York and Schuyler.

Hernandez came to Nebraska three months ago "to make a better life" and worked at Monfort.

His mom works in a Los Angeles factory. As for his father, "I haven't seen him for quite some time."

Hernandez joined a gang five years ago "to have protection" and would have a hard time leaving the group.

"You can't forget your friends," he said.

Hernandez would kill someone "in an act of self-defense" but would not target an innocent person.

He completed the 11th grade.

"I attempted to go back to school. Because of my age, they didn't accept me," he said. "It's nothing to be proud of."

Iraheta was born in El Salvador and moved to Los Angeles 10 years ago. He joined a gang five years ago "for the fun of it."

He came to Grand Island to join a sister. He lived in Grand Island with his mother, who works at Monfort. He worked there and at several restaurants. He has two sisters, four brothers and "no dad."

Iraheta wouldn't want a younger brother to join a gang.

"I wouldn't want him to be like me," he said.

People not affiliated with gangs are safe.

"This is not a gang problem," Iraheta said. "There are guys who have had hate for each other. If they aren't gang-related, they don't have to worry about anything."

"If another person has a gun pointed at me, and I have a gun, I might as well use it, or he'll use it on me," he said.

Filkin first stole something when he was 5 years old.

"My mom and dad used to do drugs," he said. "I wouldn't see them for weeks at a time."

When he was hungry, he would go to a grocery store, stick steaks underneath his sweatshirt and leave.

"The first time I took money out of a cash register, I think I was 7," he said. "My mom and dad are all cleaned up now."

He shows no remorse for his theft victims.

"I figure if they can afford it in the first place, they can buy it again," he said.

Filkin moved to Grand Island six years ago. He has a half brother and half sister. His parents moved to Alaska several months ago.

He joined a gang when he was 11 because others were "jumping me all the time."

Filkin stayed in school until the ninth grade. He got a job stocking shelves at a grocery store, where he made \$200 a week. He said he could make \$400 to \$500 a day stealing things.

Gang members "stick up for you. They defend you. Anything you need, you can go to them."

He's smoked marijuana but doesn't want to use methamphetamine.

"You become addicted to it. You get too weak to stand up for yourself. It tears you apart," he said.

Nava joined a gang four years ago and moved from Mexico two years ago. His mother lives in Grand Island and works

at Monfort. His father died in Mexico a year ago after a cut became infected. He has three brothers and three sisters. Nava attended school for eight years.

A judge placed Nava in Immigration and Naturalization Service custody in August 1997 and sent him to Texas. His mother posted his bond before his immigration hearing and brought him back to Grand Island.

Nava's gang is "like family," but he wouldn't want a brother to join one.

"I don't want to see my brother here in jail like me."