

STORY BY AUDREY R. BROWKA

# STREET SMARTS

## It's a long way from Canisius College to the graffiti-laden gangland of East Los Angeles.

Home to 450 active gangs and more than 45,000 gang members, this part of the city is known as the nation's Ground Zero of gang culture. It's a place ripe with violence, poverty and low-performing schools. But 'life in the hood' is exactly what a group of All-College Honors students sought when they traveled to East L.A. They put fears and prejudices aside to gain new perspectives on the turbulent history of gang life and modern-day efforts to help keep the peace.

"America is a diverse land with different cultures that are as diverse and complex as the white culture," says **Andrew M. Genco '14**, a special education/childhood education major. "The only way to learn about that diversity is to test and challenge ourselves. It is not enough to stay in our comfort zone."

That is why students visited some of East L.A.'s grittiest pockets. They toured Compton, birthplace of the Bloods and Crips, and saw the mark of street gangs along L.A.'s

concrete riverbed, which is a popular target for graffiti taggers. Students witnessed the squalor and the homeless at the Dolores Mission, where they served and shared lunch with illegal immigrants and day laborers. "In speaking with them, you realize that we're all in the same boat just maybe to a different degree," recalls **Rachael B. Farley '14**, a biochemistry major.

Alfred Lomas provided students' safe passage through much of the city's gang turf.

Covered in tattoos from his neck down, Lomas is a former member of the Florencia 13 gang who later became a hired gun for L.A.'s top gang leaders. He changed his ways at age 40 and now dedicates his life to creating awareness about gang life, which he says is "both romanticized and demonized by music and media." Lomas' approach is unconventional.

He founded L.A. Gang Tours. It's a different kind of drive-by; one that provides tourists with a firsthand look at high-profile gang areas and inner-city lifestyles. Photography and video taping are not allowed on the tours, nor can anyone speak with the locals. Instead, "the educational experience is on the bus," where Lomas and his crew of reformed gang members explain the social and economic conditions that allowed gangs to flourish.

"Gang life is no longer something that you're jumped into," Lomas tells students during their four-hour tour. "It's something you're born into. It's generational, four and five times over."

Gang life in East L.A. gets its roots from racial segregation and poverty.

Prior to the Civil Rights Movement, young minority men were prohibited from joining social clubs and organizations, so they formed their own. By the 1970s, East L.A. fell victim to the nation's industrial collapse. Warehouses closed. Rail yards emptied. Jobs were eliminated and family structures fell apart. As desperation set in, groups of young men turned to robbery, larceny and extortion to help put food on their families' tables. The proliferation of the drug trade in the 1980s later fueled the growth and organization of gangs and subsequently gang violence.

## Bloods and Crips are two of the most well-known Los Angeles gangs

"Unfortunately, gangs provide everything that we, as a society, have failed to provide: economic opportunities, access to the American market, protection," says Lomas. "Gangs also provide a family structure that is not often found in these communities."

Critics of L.A. Gang Tours say the project exploits an already tense situation. But Lomas keeps an early promise he made to the community. He funnels tour proceeds back into the community via micro-loans for inner-city entrepreneurs.

PHOTO: Not all graffiti art is negative. This image (left), near Pico Union, portrays a message of peace, love, hope and freedom. It shows the Virgin Mary holding three paint brushes in the colors of the Mexican flag. A flower with a peace symbol on the inside represents her heart. The words 'free humanity' reinforce the artist's visual message.



“There’s a perception out there that people can’t change,” says Lomas. “But ours is really a story of redemption. It’s a story that says we –collectively as a community - can move forward.”

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## Tagging is how gang members 'mark their turf.'

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Change became evident at several locations the students visited.

The Pico Union Graffiti Lab is an urban sanctuary for kids who want to avoid gang life. It’s a public space where budding artists can practice their world-famous graffiti and aerosol art, legally.

“Graffiti is often viewed as something negative but it can also be about beautifying areas through self-expression,” says **Richard D. Reitsma, PhD**, assistant professor of modern languages. Reitsma coordinated and supervised the East L.A. trip for the 19 students in his course *Latinos in the U.S.* The course uses literature to explore the Latino struggle of belonging to America’s melting pot and to dispel the stereotypes often affiliated with the culture. “Much of the Latino community believes that the creation and development of positive art and artists, in all formats - writing, music, graffiti- is part of the solution.

It’s a way for people to safely and creatively express themselves, and validate who they are, where they are going and what they want.”

Students saw this renewed sense of community on display at Tia Chucha’s Centro Cultural, a bookstore, café, art gallery and performance space located in Northeast San Fernando Valley, the second largest Mexican community after East L.A. Co-founded by Luis Rodriguez, the center is another success story in a community working to empower itself.

“Tia Chucha’s is a place where people of all ages can come to talk, share ideas and become skilled in the various arts,” says Rodriguez, who explains that the area was previously void of the cultural arts.

A veteran gang member by age 12, Rodriguez avoided a six-year prison sentence at age 18 and now works with young gang and non-gang men. He is a renowned gang intervention specialist, the founder of Youth Struggling for Survival and the author of *Always Running*, a memoir which Rodriguez wrote as a cautionary tale for his then 15-year old son who joined a gang.

“By opening up young people to their own creative reservoirs and imaginations, they begin to learn that there are many ways to go, not just the way that ends up hurting themselves or others,” says Rodriguez. “At Tia Chucha’s people are surrounded by the healing power of art and words; creativity is brought fully to bear and the quality of our individual lives and the lives of our diverse community are positively transformed.”

Students spoke one-on-one with Rodriguez, whose book they read in class. They also met with families and reformed gang members at Tia Chucha’s. Their conversations with these individuals and those at the homeless shelter, “brought to life the people and places we read about in class,” within the context of race, class, ethnicity and gender, says **Caitlyn M. Fennell '14**, an international relations major. “It was certainly an experience to see often dangerous areas with former rival gang members who today, sit together, joke and tell stories about why they stay on the streets but for different reasons.”

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## The gang initiation Jumped In requires new members to be beaten by current gang members.

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It is then that hearts are touched, prejudices are put aside and the silent triggers of segregation, isolation and poverty are realized.

“The stories we read in class seemed foreign to students at first but once they met members of the East L.A. community, it became clear to them that we all share basic human emotions,” says Reitsma. “My hope now is that the trip stays with them throughout the rest of their college years and beyond, and that they continue to feel it, think about it, and respond to it.”