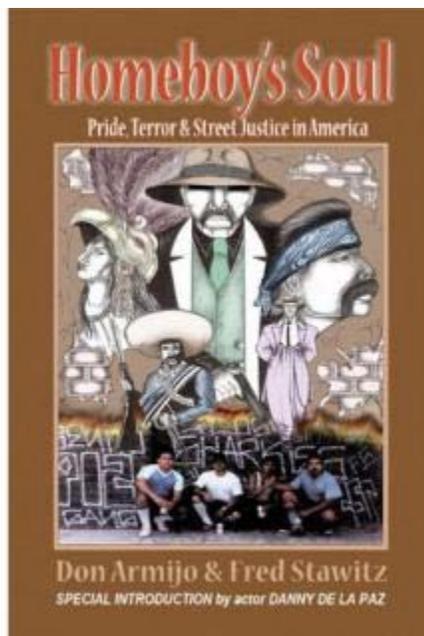


EducationNews.org

A Global Leading News Source

An Interview with Fred Stawitz: The Soul of the Gang

19/07/2010 08:40:00 Michael F. Shaughnessy, Senior Columnist EducationNews.org



Homeboy's Soul: Pride, Terror, and Street Justice in America

7.19.10 - Michael F. Shaughnessy - Homeboy's Soul is the result of a chance meeting with Don Armijo at a writer's conference in Los Angeles. Don had an incredible story to tell and wanted to know how to write a book. But with his *cholo* look and tattoos, no one at the conference would talk to him.

Michael F. Shaughnessy
Eastern New Mexico University
Portales, New Mexico

1) Fred, you are co-author, I believe of a book entitled Homeboy's Soul. How did this book come about?

Homeboy's Soul is the result of a chance meeting with Don Armijo at a writer's conference in Los Angeles. Don had an incredible story to tell and wanted to know how to write a book. But with his *cholo* look and tattoos, no one at the conference would talk to him. My wife Dolores, who is Latina, introduced herself to Don. After speaking with him for a few minutes, she caught my attention and suggested that we should listen to him. Seven years later, we have Homeboy's Soul.

2) Where is it set, and who are the main characters?

Homeboy's Soul is set in Pomona, California, which is located on the eastern edge of Los Angeles County. The main characters in this true story are Don Armijo and the homeboys he grew up with in the *barrio*.

3) What is happening in this book?

The story covers Don's life from age eleven through adulthood when he became shotcaller of one of the most violent gangs in the area. Following the murder of a rival gang member, Don served time in prison where he had the opportunity to reflect on his life and come to the conclusion that he could change his path in life by changing the decisions he made. Homeboy's Soul provides an extremely accurate portrayal of gang life through the eyes of someone who has seen it all and would caution anyone from going down that path.

4) Now, let's talk about gangs---how do you define a "gang" and what function do they serve?

The City of Houston Mayor's Anti-Gang Task Force defines a gang as "three or more members who associate together and exhibit one or more of the following characteristics:

- Individually or collectively engage in or have engaged in a pattern of negative behavior that could include criminal activity
- A shared sign, symbol, name, manner of dress, and/or other identifiable characteristics
- A geographical territory"

5) How are gangs today different from the 1950's, 1960's etc?

Following World War II, Chicano gangs reflected the need of the barrios to defend themselves against the abuses of the police and the military. Each successive generation has grown incrementally more distant from that history. Gangs have become increasingly violent and more well organized as criminal enterprises often ruled from within America's prison system.

6) Tell me about identifying items--colors, or clothes, or shirts or whatever.....

Up through the 70s and 80s, Chicano gangs from the LA area had adopted a particular style of

dress and mannerism that is described in the book. The colors, clothes, signs, symbols, tattoos, terminology, etc. that various gangs now employ are as varied as corporate logos.

7) What emotional needs does a gang serve? Is it peer pressure? The desire to be accepted? Or survival?

The City of Houston Mayor's Anti-Gang Task Force suggests the following reasons for joining a gang:

- Lack of parental involvement and/or family structure
- Lack of positive role models
- Peer pressure/coercion
- Respect and recognition from peers
- Boredom
- Access to alcohol, illegal drugs, money, weapons
- Protection from existing or rival gangs
- Revenge
- Family history of gang involvement

Gang members are most likely males between the ages of 12 and 25. Many come from single parent homes, homes where there is little or no adult supervision, or homes where a parent is incarcerated. They are low academic performers, truants, and cause disciplinary issues at home and school. They have low self-esteem and are usually indifferent, angry, and apathetic because they feel hopeless.

Gangs offer acceptance where none may be forthcoming in any other areas of a young person's life.

8) I used to teach in the South Bronx, and territoriality seemed to be a major factor- does your book discuss this issue?

The issue of territory is covered quite extensively in the book.

9) What about drugs, alcohol, and weapons- where do they fit in?

Most gangs are in the commodities market. Sales of illegal drugs provide them a healthy source of income. Weapons help gangs enforce control of their market share and are an essential component of any plan to expand sales territory. Alcohol helps pass the time between encounters with hostile competitors.

10) What can or should the schools be doing?

School officials should be looking at reducing the high school dropout rate which in some communities hits an amazing 40 to 50 percent. Children need resources, support structures, opportunities, and acceptance. When any of these things are missing in a child's life, they are more susceptible to recruitment by gangs. Obviously, schools cannot provide all of those things

but school superintendents in districts with double-digit dropout rates should be raising hell in their communities to get the resources and support children need to be successful in school.

11) What have I neglected to ask?

Let's modify the previous question to ask, what should communities be doing?

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention within the U.S. Department of Justice suggests a three pronged approach to deal with gangs. It is called the Comprehensive Gang Model and involves prevention, intervention, and suppression. Prevention addresses keeping young people on the path to success so they are not attracted to gang life. This results in cutting off a gang's supply of recruits. Intervention targets those gang members who are still salvageable in an effort to weaken the ranks. Suppression puts the squeeze on all gang-related activity to lessen a gang's ability to operate in a community. This is a very workable approach but successfully implementing requires community support and a significant commitment of resources in each of the three areas.

Too often communities leave gang prevention in the hands of the police who are more adept at suppression. Suppression without equal efforts at prevention and intervention will not work because gang activity is a symptom of underlying socioeconomic issues in the community.

Prevention is the most cost-effective strategy. It requires looking at what it takes to keep children in school and motivated toward becoming contributing members of society. Children need resources, support structures, opportunities, and acceptance. When any of these things are missing in a child's life, they are more susceptible to recruitment by gangs.

We propose a coalition between business, community and government to evaluate and ensure that these elements are adequately present in the community. We will be going into more detail on how this coalition would work as we continue to discuss Homeboy's Soul and what can be done to address the gang problems faced by many communities.

12) How can people get a copy of your book and where? Do you have a web site?

Homeboy's Soul is available through Amazon.com, bn.com, and can be special ordered from most book stores. Our web site is [.HomeboysSoul.com](http://HomeboysSoul.com).

#



.Michael F. Shaughnessy is currently Professor of Psychology at Eastern New Mexico University and is a Consulting Editor for Gifted Education International and Educational Psychology Review. He has been involved in gifted education since receiving his doctorate from the University of Nebraska Lincoln, in 1983. He also holds master's degrees from Bank Street College of Education and the College of New Rochelle in Guidance and Counseling and School Psychology. He has some post doctoral training from George Washington University in Washington, D.C. and Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. He has presented on gifted topics in

Australia, South Korea, South Africa, Slovenia, Finland, Germany, England, France, and has been a Consulting Editor for Gifted Education International. He has written, edited or co-edited about a dozen books and published several hundred articles, book reviews, research reports, interviews and commentaries

[.EducationNews.org](http://www.educationnews.org)

[://www.educationnews.org/michael-f-shaughnessy/95943.html](http://www.educationnews.org/michael-f-shaughnessy/95943.html)