



OFFICE OF  
THE DISTRICT ATTORNEY  
COUNTY OF RIVERSIDE

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On August 12, 2005, a young woman named, Vanessa Torres, was leaving a friend's family gathering in Indio. Up to that moment her life was successful and her future was limitless. Vanessa had recently graduated Indio High School with a 3.6 grade point average while participating in a college prep program called "Upward Bound." She was a dedicated young woman, as evidenced by her high school internship during her junior and senior years for a local lawyer.

When she graduated she promptly enrolled at College of the Desert and had started working for a local surgeon. Her dreams were within her reach due to her own efforts and those of her family.

As she was walking from the house, a car slowly drove by. Inside were three "Vario Coachella Rifa 52" gang members. One drove and the two other opened up with a .44 caliber Magnum handgun and an M-1 carbine rifle. Vanessa Torres, 19 years of age, was shot three times and died shortly thereafter. Bullets also tore through the home she was visiting, endangering a grandmother and her three grandchildren. Two other family members were shot, but luckily survived.

"Vario Coachella Rifa 52" is one of 45 gangs who terrorize our Coachella Valley. The documented gang members total approximately 2,126. In Riverside County the number of gangs and their documented gang members are even more significant – 391 gangs and 10,620 gang members. Disturbingly these numbers do not include associates, crime partners, and hangers-on that routinely swell the size and strength of a gang.

There are many tools available to law enforcement to attack this problem, some old, some new. In August last year our office borrowed a tactic that had first been used by the Los Angeles City Attorney's office in 1987 against a gang – a gang injunction. Its effectiveness is directly related to the very nature of gangs themselves.

A gang's strength and power is in its members and their association. If you can limit or even stop that criminal collaboration, a gang can be broken. Last year we asked for, and received a gang injunction against East Side Riva, ESR, one of Riverside County's oldest, largest, and most violent. Their claimed turf includes a swath of territory between downtown Riverside and the University of California at Riverside, and engulfs several parks, elementary and middle schools, and two high schools.

Chillingly, since 2002 ESR has waged a campaign of violence against African-American males. In one instance they beat an African-American homeless man to death; in another they shot a man in the back as he was running away. In still another, a Nigerian man visiting local friends was seated in a car waiting for a light to change when an ESR gang member drove by and shot him in the head. The gang is so proud of its activities its members boast on the internet of “hunting” African-American men.

This is a gang whose members have literally committed thousands of felonies over the past several decades. They range from remorseless murders, to all other types of violence and victimization one’s mind can imagine.

The District Attorney’s Office and local law enforcement have aggressively investigated and prosecuted ESR members. While somewhat effective, such traditional tactics have a weakness. It relies solely on law enforcement reacting to the commission of a crime and therefore the creation of another victim.

Our office couldn’t, and wouldn’t, wait for more victims. So we sued ESR and sought to restrain the behavior of its members. The tactic is widely known as a gang injunction and prohibits gang members from doing a number of things. Most notably, the injunction is a court order that prohibits gang members from associating with each other or loitering in public areas such as parks. If a gang member violates the court order we can file charges against them and they can be jailed.

In examining the effectiveness of gang injunctions we need only look to other communities. Law enforcement in San Clemente recently reported a 33% decrease in gang related calls to police after a gang injunction was secured. In San Juan Capistrano they reported a sharp 85% drop with the same crime tool.

In the heart of ESR territory lies a park, with picnic tables, a play area, and a little league field. Before the injunction ordinary citizens and their children avoided Patterson Park at all costs, especially after the sun set. Only ESR gang members gathered there. After the injunction was secured I received a call from a long-time local minister. He told me that for the first time in many years families were back in the park. I confirmed that later when I went by myself at night and chanced upon a little league baseball game and families throughout the park.

ESR had displayed a criminal prominence in our community that warranted our significant attention. But there are other gangs that have significantly victimized our citizens and community and they exist in the Coachella Valley.

Our desert gangs commit an enormous number of violent crimes ranging from murder to simple battery. They either control or are involved in the sale of all kinds of drugs. Their graffiti seeks to create fear and intimidation in our community. In a real sense, victims of their crimes are unwillingly drafted into a war on our streets. For Riverside County, this is a war we cannot afford to lose.

Every lawful tactic must be used in our struggle. If we ignore this threat our future is lost.

Vanessa Torres, a promising, gifted local girl was part of our community's future. What her family, and our community, has lost because of gang violence is irreplaceable. Yet, there are many more Vanessas in our community still to protect.