Interview with James Kunkel about the Latin Kings gang

The questions were asked by Ines Aubert, Switzerland, 2019

James, you've been in prison in Texas for nine years. How is it for you to do this interview with someone you don't know and who doesn't know a lot about gangs?

Being that I'm not from Texas, every person who has questioned me has been a stranger - although when it comes to the TDCJ's Gang Intelligence (GI), or other gang members, there is already an understanding of what 'the life' entails. Being interviewed by someone who is completely outside the realm of street gangs and organized crime has allowed me to share my knowledge, as well as my story in a formal way, which, up until now, I've not had the opportunity to do. So, thank you.

What is the name of your gang and where does it operate?

The Latin Kings' largest population can be found in Chicago, Illinois, where they originate from, and New York City.

The Crown - their most popular symbol - usually adorns the head of a Latino-looking gentleman, though sometimes it might grace the head of a lion, symbol of both power and the King of the Jungle. This is formally known as the Master. The Crown represents various principles, tenets, and hierarchical positions of the organization.

How did you get involved in this brotherhood and what are the necessary requirements?

I had a stable home to live in, and did not live 'on the streets' as is usually and inaccurately portrayed of most gang bangers (gang members).

My relationship with the Latin Kings began in 1983, at the age of 11, while attending public school in Markham, Illinois. This was the age that I became aware of and was introduced to racism. Born and raised in a predominantly black neighborhood, I had a ton of black friends - male and female alike - throughout my entire childhood. I was 'color-blind' in this way, until the older kids from the junior high school made their feelings known by mercilessly picking on younger kids of the opposite race. This led to segregationist practices, which ultimately led to longtime friends joining opposing gangs.

Some gangs were based solely on racialist creeds, like the Black Gangster Disciples and the White Fence. Even the Latin Kings were strictly 'Hispanic only' at one time. But being that there were very few white boys in my 'hood (neighborhood), and even less so Hispanics, it was almost a necessity and a survival tool to combine our meager forces, in order to combat the undeserved disparity we were subjected to at the will of the ignorant black populace.

It seemed that everyone had an older brother or a cousin or an uncle who was a member of one gang or another, and the appeal in joining something so exclusive was overwhelming to some, myself included. First, we found ourselves 'hanging out' with these older gang members,

performing menial tasks in the hopes of gaining recognition and favoritism from the 'higher ups', and this worked, as I later learned, just as it was designed to. This also helped establish a pecking order amongst us youngsters; some people are born leaders, some of us are born soldiers, and others just need protection in order to survive and thrive in this cold, hard world.

What happens after you are accepted as a member?

Once you've established yourself as a useful asset, you receive what is known as the 'Blessing into the Nation'. This is just a really, really nice way of saying that you were jumped into the gang, as you usually got your ass whipped.

As odd as it may sound, this beating received at the hands of your closest friends seems to strengthen familial bonds - while also putting both your fighting and defensive skills to the test, as well as on display for all to see.

Is there a certain hierarchy that is followed?

Yes, and in some cases, members are permitted to hold multiple positions at the same time. Also, these positions are determined by a tribe's need for them; a person's strength in a particular area, like kicking ass, creative accounting etc., and democracy - that is, we vote before making decisions. Nothing and no one are taken for granted, and each member is encouraged and entitled to express their opinion in all matters concerning 'nation business', as it were.

What was the behind the foundation of the brotherhood?

The ideology behind the Latin Kings was initially intended for the advancement of the Latino population in American cities - for both immigrants and natives alike - and this held true in the beginning. At least for the most part.

As with most fundamentals, traditions, and rules, evolution changed things up a bit, although a good majority of the basic principles still stand today. An example of this is how the treasury operates; funds are collected in a variety of ways: monthly dues, drug sales, imposed monetary penalties, etc., and they are re-distributed on an as-needed basis for electric bills, car notes, tuition or rent.

These funds are also used to make large-scale purchases, such as homes, vehicles, construction equipment, and controlled substances (drugs), where everything can be used to turn over a profit – thereby refilling the coffers so that it can be done over and over again. A typical for-profit business strategy, only not always of a legal nature.

There are some success stories to be told, such as members completing their studies and becoming teachers or business owners themselves. But the downfall here is that the age-old adage tends to apply: "You can take a gangster out of the hood, but you can't take the hood out of the gangster." Regardless of how high your test scores were, or how established your business may be, you are always indebted to the Nation - and a life of crime is just that - a life of crime.

How have things changed over the years?

Gang violence in the Texas prison system has dissipated immensely in recent years, due mainly to the TDCJ's Gang Intelligence Committee (GI's) work in weeding out the riffraff (segregating members of specific gangs), while also offering members the chance to resign or quit, by participating in the G.R.A.D. / Gang Renouncement and Dissociation Program - something that seemed impossible to do just ten short years ago.

Are there certain behaviors expected of you when you join the brotherhood?

Our list of rules is actually catalogued as articles, and Article 23 is a great example of these, as it includes the caveat 'Once a King, always a King', as well as the usual do's and don'ts you'd expect to find in any basic set of rules and regulations.

One of the mainstay rules concerns drug abuse - in that it is forbidden. However, the overindulgence of both marijuana and alcohol seems to be ignored, for the most part, regardless of the fact that they are both addictive and habit forming, not to mention huge contributors to poor decision making!

Certain punishments are incurred for breaking the rules, like disrespecting another member, stealing from the 'familia', or turning state's evidence, and these punishments are known as 'violations'. Again, this is just a nice way of saying 'beating' as that is what you're likely to receive. Minor violations might consist of a 30 second to two minute beating at the hands of one to three of your brothers, often at the same time! In most cases, this is a one-time affair, as you're not likely to forget a brutal beating by your best friends.

The most extreme cases - testifying in a court of law against a member, or the unsanctioned murder of a fellow member - could warrant one of two things, or both: being expelled from the gang, or being killed.

What would you call such punishment? Strict? Just? Corrective? It appears quite violent to me.

All of the above is an apt description, but no decent parent wants their children to become insolent, drug-abusing criminals, right? Instituting physical punishments to correct negative behaviors is a common practice, though I'll admit that the violations handed out can be quite a bit more severe than the typical spanking one might render their petulant child - though I feel the premise is the same, only on a much more adult level.

What benefits did you associate with being a member and how do these compare to the dangers?

As with any club, organization, team, etc., there are advantages and disadvantages alike, and these vary per region, locale and personal sentiments. Because we were already a tight-knit community, we attended church together on the usual holidays, and held christenings, quinceañeras and birthday parties for each other's children at one another's homes, much like any ordinary family does, so this strengthened our familial bonds across multiple generations.

Depending on one's personal perspective, I saw few disadvantages, and these mostly revolved around breaking established laws and other such legalities - which only led to inviting the police to search you and your property like hungry rodents, or inviting judges, prosecuting attorneys and juries to openly view your criminal record, which can only be viewed in a negative light, especially if you're labeled as a gang member.

The dangers come in the form of being, as a gang member, in opposition to every other gang, club or clique - from the police to the usual enemies. And as all of the above are usually armed, they should be considered dangerous as well - including the police.

What impact has the brotherhood had on you and on the way you think?

It is the culture of today's gang mentality that has hardened my heart, I think. How can the gang violence happening in the world today be considered 'normal' in any way, shape or form? How can the Latin Kings participate in any of this under the pretenses of righteousness, productivity, or necessity? I can no longer agree with this archaic train of thought. Is it because I am nearing my 50th birthday? Probably, but isn't it natural to want to move on to other, perhaps more productive ventures?

I'll always have a place in my heart for the Nation - hell, I've been in this 'familia' for 34 years now! - but it's past time to open another chapter in my life.

Can you just tell us in a few sentences what role you think your gang will play in your future?

Hopefully, my future history with the Latin Kings will be nothing more than a story to relate to the younger generations - both the positive and negative aspects of it – and nothing more. A simple narrative of a past chapter in my life.

Thank you for sharing all of this with us, James. It's very interesting to get a little insight into the Latin Kings. I wish you all the best.

For more information, please google "Latin Kings"