

Matt Sanchez



by Nick Welsh, *Santa Barbara Independent*

Matt Sanchez, the former Eastside gang leader who spent the past 20 years working to provide at-risk teens an alternative to the gang life, died Wednesday from complications stemming from liver and kidney problems.

By day, Sanchez ran Montecito Barbers, but in the rest of his time he played a founding role with such organizations as All for One and Hoods in the Woods that target young men drawn to the gang scene. His agenda was not just to take at-risk kids out of their environment and show them some place new — like a camping trip to the Sierras — but to take them with members of rival gangs. Such trips, however, came only after much mentoring, counseling, and talking.

What made young gang members listen was Sanchez's own personal history. As a teen in the 1970s, Sanchez, a bear of a man with slicked-back black hair, was a shot-caller with an Eastside gang, and his role in that regard has since become the stuff of urban legend. Many a retired cop has war stories of chasing Sanchez and his brother all over town. While his brother accidentally shot himself playing Russian roulette, Sanchez wound up addicted to heroin and spending nearly four years behind bars in various lockups. He would also join the Marines and kick his addiction.

When gang activity began to spike in the early 1990s, Sanchez emerged as a key player in the response to find solutions other than incarceration. He worked closely with former city councilmember Babatunde Fodayemi — also recently deceased — and the Pro-Youth Coalition, helping to create the Hoods in the Woods program. Later, he would start All for One. Those efforts were given fresh urgency after a 14-year-old Eastsider stabbed a 15-year-old Westsider to death on State Street by Saks Fifth Avenue five years ago.

As gang violence became more of a community concern, city officials pushed for stricter law enforcement. But others in the community, like Sanchez, called for different options and other approaches. When South Coast movers and shakers sought to assemble a team of major players to form the South Coast Task Force on Youth Gangs, Sanchez was at the top of everyone's list. He was a central figure in community discussions and debates over gang violence.

In this dialog, Sanchez displayed rare endurance and longevity. He managed to be blunt and very direct but without being personal. In 2000, Sanchez was awarded the California Peace Prize by the California Wellness Foundation, along with the likes of the more nationally famous Father Gregory Boyle of Los Angeles. With that award, he was also given \$25,000.

In recent years, Sanchez and his family have been beset by a host of problems. He himself weathered a bout with cancer, and his barbershop burned down. And his parents were victimized by notorious scam artist Denise D'Sant Angelo, who persuaded them she could help prevent them from losing their home to foreclosure. Not only did the Sanchezes lose their home, but they lost thousands of dollars to D'Sant Angelo as well. Despite such hardships, Sanchez took delight during his last months in riding the Harley-Davidson his son bought him.