COLUMN ONE

Changing Lives, a Family at a Time

■ Starting with a support group for grieving mothers, Brother Modesto Leon has built a social services network to counter gangs, poverty. Inspiring others is a key.

By JANE GROSS
TIMES URBAN AFFAIRS WRITER

"Empowerment" has become a tired buzzword, the mantra of inner-city do-gooders.

But the term comes alive when uttered by Brother Modesto Leon, a Clarentian missionary who turns rhetoric to reality in the most hellish corners of Los Angeles County, where teenagers gun each other down as a matter of course and are mourned by parents too bewildered to know what hit them.

In the past quarter-century, Leon has built a countywide empire of youth and family services in poor Latino neighborhoods from Pomona to Pacoima. He has developed 16 alternative schools, along with parenting classes, gang retreats and neighborhood revitalization programs, serving 1,000 children and twice as many adults.

He rarely makes headlines and shuns attention. But elected leaders, law enforcement officials and child advocates say his unusual combination of tactics helps solve often intractable social problems. Among his skills: relentless pursuit of resources, uncommon cooperation with other agencies and a knack for letting others take credit for what he has done.

"It's not *my* gifts," Leon says with trademark modesty. "It's helping people bring out their gifts. You listen to them, work with them, grow with them, and you don't always step in when things go wrong."

Brother Modesto was a young associate pastor at Our Lady of Soledad Church in East Los Angeles in 1972, presiding at gangland wakes and ministering to grieving mothers and wondering what more he could do.

He began with a support group for these bereaved women, then a school for their surviving children, then more schools and more parents' groups, in other besieged neigh-

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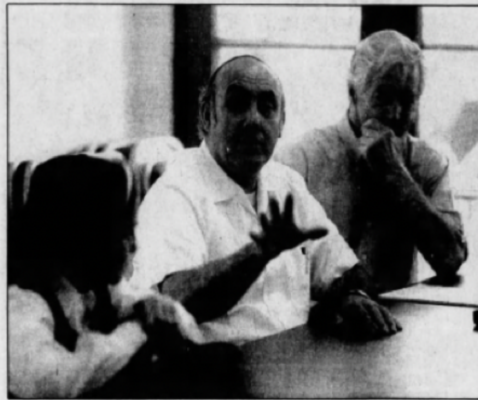

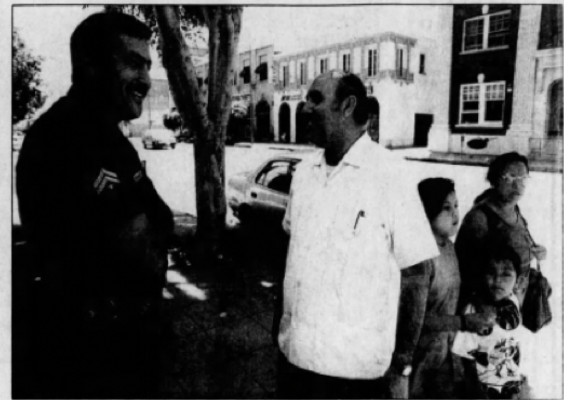

Photos by GENARO MOLINA / Los Angeles Times

Left, Brother Modesto Leon attends a community meeting to discuss crime in the MacArthur Park area. Right, Leon talks with Los Angeles Police Officer Mark Archuleta about problems in the neighborhood.

LEON: Countering Gangs

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borhoods.

Today, at 49, he steers $4 million a year in government contracts and grants into his rapidly expanding nonprofit agency, called Soledad Enrichment Action, which operates out of rented churches, borrowed basements and abandoned buildings that Leon charms from their owners for a token dollar a year.

His is a decentralized empire, with a paid staff of 150 and five times as many volunteers, all given wide latitude to design programs to turn around families and communities.

One such family is the Chavez clan of South-Central Los Angeles.

Not too long ago, Teresa Chavez was packing ceramics by day and screaming at her unruly children by night. Her husband was drinking to excess, trying to rule his wife and offspring with the iron fist that had worked for his *macho* father before him.

Two of the Chavez girls, 13 and 14 at the time, were running the streets—tattooed with gang signs, stealing cars and speaking a different language, literally and figuratively, from their Mexican mother and father.

The Chavezes' son was a wannabe tagger and their youngest daughter, only in grade school, was already ditching. Their house was riddled with bullet holes from mayhem between rival gangs that had carved up the neighborhood.

Teresa Chavez was floundering. She chased gang members from the corner and barred them from the house, so her daughters stopped coming home. When she found counselors to talk to them, the girls laughed in their faces and cursed at them. Desperate, Chavez turned to a local priest, who sent her to Leon.

Cuban-born and Los Angeles-bred, a balding man in a white guayabera and dark polyester slacks, Leon concentrates his street ministry in the eye of the tornado—Compton, East Los Angeles and South-Central, where 10 of his 16 schools for 7th- to 12th-graders are located.

The schools are designed as safe havens.

In Compton, four sites are placed so members of gangs like Largos, CV3, Locos and Tokers can attend class without crossing into enemy territory. In South-Central and East Los Angeles, morning and afternoon sessions keep rival gangbangers apart.

Certain teens are taught one-on-one because they belong to gangs that will mix with no other, something Soledad officials would not know without inside information from school secretaries, bilingual women with roots in the community. Despite these precautions, Leon guesses that 15 students or siblings are killed each year, after school, at nights and on weekends.

Teresa Chavez's older daughters grudgingly enrolled in one of Leon's South-Central schools and their younger siblings have followed. The troubled teenagers thrived in small classes, with individual learning contracts and the year-round attention of teachers and aides who understood their world.

The classrooms welcome, and often tame, out-of-control youths who have been expelled from more schools than they can count, teenage mothers who must bring their babies with them, and convicted car thieves wearing probation department ankle bracelets.

The Chavez girls leaned about numerators and denominators and how to change adjectives to nouns. They wrote daily journals. They answered reading comprehension questions based on newspaper articles about their neighborhoods and heroes. They traded gang clothes for uniforms.

Their mother, despite the demands of her menial job and the prideful objections of her husband, enrolled in parenting classes, where she learned to reason with her children rather than shout at them, to understand the cultural and emotional forces cleaving her family.

These parenting classes, the brainchild of Soledad's Sister Inez Telles, were initiated after Soledad students in the original handful of schools complained that they were making healthier life choices while their parents remained abusive and unsupportive.

A minority of parents, virtually all women, come to the 22-week program, which includes lessons on spousal relations, nonviolent discipline, participation in school affairs and generational conflict in immigrant families.

Teresa Chavez's older daughters now have good jobs—Alida as a case manager in a drug abuse agency, Claudia as a secretary at Soledad. Her husband has stopped drinking. And Teresa Chavez has become what Sister Inez calls "a wounded healer," teaching parenting classes to women like herself throughout South-Central. Chavez earns a modest salary and excellent benefits, sits behind a big desk with plaques of recognition and proudly hands out engraved business cards.

"I didn't know I was capable of doing what I'm doing," Chavez said in Spanish. "I didn't know until Brother showed me that I could be a leader in my community."

Similarly empowered is Leovigilda Rios, whom Leon turned from a docile stay-at-home mother of nine into a community organizer.

Rios is blessed with well-behaved children and a sober, hard-working husband who labored long hours on a construction job to pay parochial school tuition. But her Eastside neighborhood of Lincoln Heights—just a few doors down from Leon and the two priests who are his housemates—is plagued by the nighttime sound of gunfire and the sight of brush fires set by gangbangers on the sloping plain above the Los Angeles River.

Leon had lived in Lincoln Heights for a half-dozen years, but had directed his energies to other communities until mid-1995, when a local 14-year-old gang member was shot dead by police on Eastlake Avenue, not far from a desolate wedge of parkland, and the area erupted in rioting.

Then he proposed to Rios that a children's program might inoculate the little ones against criminal temptation, unite the neighbors and reclaim the streets and park for law-abiding citizens.

Leon suggested starting with a field trip to the YMCA and gave Rios a handful of permission slips. Terrified to walk the streets, the slight, soft-spoken woman screwed up her courage one Friday at dusk and went door-to-door.

The next morning, two dozen youngsters showed up, squealing with excitement. Many had never left the neighborhood before, but in the months to come they would go to City Hall, a police precinct, the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena and a Dodger game—all arranged by Leon, a genius at scrounging tickets, food, equipment and even buildings wherever he can find them.

With Rios and several of her grown children supervising homework and teaching arts and crafts, Leon began scavenging in earnest. First he got $15,000 in private grants to buy supplies and begin cleaning up the park. Then he went to Los Angeles City Hall with an outstretched hand.

The neighborhood's City Council representative, Mike Hernandez, a fan of Leon's, came up with $80,000 and a flock of city services. The palm trees in Ela Park were cleansed of graffiti, the street lights retrofitted with bulletproof shields, portable toilets and playground equipment installed and flowers planted. The Police Department sent extra patrols, and probation officers joined the neighbors at a Thanksgiving feast in the reclaimed park.

But that was just the beginning. Leon had his eye on a stately Craftsman house, abandoned by its owner and vandalized by the gangs. First Public Savings Bank held a $250,000 mortgage on the property, but sold it to the city for $150,000 and threw in a $30,000 donation to Soledad. The federal Department of Housing and Urban Development helped neighbors restore the derelict structure, which Soledad now rents for $1 a year as headquarters for Rios' program.

"There's a million Mrs. Rioses," Leon said. "We can do this in any neighborhood. Charity begins at home."

Rios, for her part, has a life she could barely imagine as a traditional Mexican housewife.

"I am a beginner," she said in halting English. "I never worked before; my husband wouldn't let me. But Brother Modesto trusted me. He gave me those fliers, even though I didn't know how. He gave me guidance, a helping hand, and look at the beautiful things that have happened!"

It delighted Leon, friends say, when he picked up a copy of the Los Angeles Reader and saw Rios—not him—featured as the savior of Lincoln Heights.

These days Leon is trying to make beautiful things happen near MacArthur Park in the Pico-Union district west of downtown, a densely populated immigrant neighborhood riddled by some of Los Angeles' worst gang violence.

He has acquired a 15,000-square-foot building on 7th Street between Coronado and Carondelet, a beauty before the homeless stripped it of all its copper pipes and air-conditioning units. The abandoned structure had been owned by the late Emmet L. Wemple, an internationally known landscape architect. At Leon's behest, the family donated it, with Soledad agreeing to pay off the $233,000 mortgage, only a fraction of the huge building's value.

Turning this structure into offices, classrooms and recreational spaces is the group's latest sweat equity project. Meanwhile, Leon prowls the nearby streets, seeking recruits to help him take back the neighborhood.

One fetid apartment building has an absentee landlord who has yet to respond to Leon's calls. "It will probably take a month before he realizes I'm coming back every day to look for him," the cleric said.

Another well-maintained building is full of families too frightened to come out from behind a steel gate. Leon begged them to join him recently at an anti-violence march. Four showed up. But a few days later, he invited them to a community meeting. More than 40 came, asking for help in setting up a neighborhood *guarderia*, or nursery. Within days it opened, staffed by a volunteer nun.

Leon has also forged a partnership with the Jack LaLarne Foundation, which is building a gym for poor kids right down the block. He offered to staff their programs in exchange for fund-raising help. Now the two groups are dunning the police for more cruisers and for assistance closing a corner liquor store, a gang hangout with a thick file of complaints.

These days, Brother Modesto is in the street less than he'd like to be, forced instead to administer, raise funds and build a staff and volunteer corps adequate to his expanding empire.

He is also trying to pace himself more realistically than he once did.

In 1993, a year when he officiated at 112 wakes, sometimes two in one night, Leon found himself fighting an intractable cold, waking up more tired than when he went to sleep, unable to still the trembling in his hands. "I was burned, burned, burned," he said.

On doctor's orders, he retreated to a Trappist monastery in Oregon for a six-month sabbatical. There he hiked, read, prayed, submitted his sore body to deep-tissue massage. When that got boring, he volunteered in a federal penitentiary and advised local law enforcement officials on gangs inching north.

Refreshed, Leon is now a tornado of expansion plans.

He has started a new delinquency prevention program in East Los Angeles, funded by the state, that offers 20 weeks of tutoring, recreation and counseling to children between the ages of 8 and 12. The goal is to bring them up one grade level, point them toward college and teach their mothers and fathers parenting skills.

Leon also hopes to expand a program of gang retreats, called Come Togethers—one part Outward Bound, one part est and one part Toughlove—run jointly with a consortium of agencies that recommend youths from rival gangs.

Then there are plans for two new school sites, in Venice and Altadena, and feelers from West Covina. There is an application pending before the county Department of Education to grant Soledad a charter to run its schools with more autonomy, and plans to sell the parenting curriculum to other cities.

And there are the serendipitous projects that pique Leon's interest every time he takes to the streets, as he did recently in search of a 12-year-old former student who left school, disappeared from home and joined the city's largest gang, 18th Street.

Baby Rusty is the boy's street name and his mother told Leon that he might be squatting in a dilapidated building at 12th and Lake streets where the windows are shot out, the stairwells reek and the entry is a drug bazaar.

Brother Modesto's eyes fill with tears when he locates the building. "People actually *live* here," he says, amazed despite the fact that he witnesses such squalor daily. "And the ones inside, even the hardest of them, are basically good if you find the light inside them. This is the next place I want to come."