



VIVA! BARRIOS UNIDOS

Told by Peggy R. Townsend

His grandmother called him Nane, meaning “Walks in Peace.” It’s an unusual name for one who spends his days in the toughest neighborhoods of the country. Then again, Nane is a rather unusual man. His real name is Daniel Alejandro. In barrios throughout the nation, he fights the violence and addictions that are killing America’s youth.

The barrio where he started his work lies in the shadow of the Giant Dipper rollercoaster in Santa Cruz, California. It’s a tiny neighborhood filled with run-down homes and broken dreams. Drug dealers stand on every corner, gang graffiti litters the walls, and most of the tourists who pass by on their way to the nearby amusement park don’t even notice it exists.

It is here that Nane began Barrios Unidos. He combines messages of hope and understanding with practical programs like job training and computer courses, as well as art classes. “Kids aren’t born gang members or racists,” he says. “They become that way.” But Nane can tell you from personal experience that they don’t have to.

His voice is so soft that a listener has to lean in very close to hear the story of his life, but it is definitely worth the effort. He was born in Merigold, Mississippi, the child of migrant workers who followed the crops through America’s heartland. By the age of five, he was picking cotton, asparagus, and beets alongside his family. Living in noisy labor camps, dusty tents, and once even under a tree, was the norm. “I just accepted it,” says Nane. What else could he do? He’d never known anything different.

The day his grandfather died, a life that was simply hard turned bad. The patriarch, Don Pancho, returned home from a long day of chopping beets with

a short-handled hoe. Soon after, he collapsed. Twelve-year-old Nane held his seventy-two-year-old grandfather in his arms, begging him not to die, but it was too late.

After Don Pancho's death, Nane's family fell apart. His father began to drink, and jobs became more scarce. Nane felt his father's pain as he bowed his head before the bosses and searched for work. He wanted nothing more than to escape, but there was nowhere to go. He decided if he couldn't run from his pain, he'd numb it. At twelve years of age, he started sniffing glue. By thirteen he'd smoked his first joint. When he was seventeen he tried LSD. He returned from Vietnam a heroin addict.

During a short jail sentence for drug use, he took a hard look at himself. He knew if he didn't change his path, he'd wind up like the gangsters and drug dealers around him: in prison for a very long time, or dead.

When he got out of jail, Nane used the GI Bill to attend Fresno City College and transfer to the University of California, Santa Cruz. As he studied, he gained perspective on his life. He understood that the same despair that had nearly destroyed him was running rampant in the barrios. Without help, and with few choices, many young boys were destined to repeat the mistakes he had lived, and kill each other or self-destruct.

Nane chose to help. He went out into the streets and started talking to kids. It was that simple. He hung out with them, counseled them, and talked to them about better ways of living, alternatives to prison or death. To reach the kids better, he decided to walk his talk: he conquered his own drug addictions.

But the way out of addiction and despair was "one step forward and two steps back." One day Nane reached the low point in his life. He had lost twelve relatives and friends in twelve years, including his two brothers; his childhood hero, Uncle Pancho; and his grandmother. Finally, all he could feel was the pain. "I didn't know how to let go of the tragedies in my life," he said. Desperate to escape, Nane overdosed and was near death.

As he was rushed to the hospital's emergency room, Nane had a vision in which he could actually see his brother Leo at the end of a tunnel of flashing

light. “Go back, go back,” Leo said. “It’s not your time.” Then he saw his other brother, Tavo, who said the same thing.

“When I finally woke up, I realized the Creator had given me the opportunity to see my brothers and to know they were okay,” Nane remembers. “After that I could let go of the pain.”

The next day he went to the cemetery and prayed quietly with his brothers. “I realized that I needed to deal with my own life—to move forward,” he said. From then on, Nane found strength from being spiritually connected through traditional Native American ceremonies. He sought guidance from tribal elders, and also spoke more with people of different faiths. “I began to focus on my own mission in life,” Nane says, “to better our communities and to stop the violence among our young people.”

Nane founded Barrios Unidos working from the trunk of his car. The group was to provide new role models for the youth of America. It was 1977, and he was twenty-seven years old. While his wife sold tacos to make ends meet, he and his small band of volunteers pursued their dream: providing youth with a world free of violence, drugs, and alcohol abuse. They went to schools, walked the barrios, and worked late into the night. After a while, Barrios Unidos moved into a small office, then used grant money to buy a computer so they could write applications for other grants. Soon their message spread, as did their impact.

Today, Barrios Unidos has a room full of computers and a staff of twenty-six people in several chapters across the country. They offer extensive programs and free food and counseling to those in need. Three summer Kids’ Klub programs reach out to the youngest residents of the barrios. To foster an entrepreneurial spirit, Barrios Unidos started a silk-screening business run by teens. The proceeds of the business help fund their initiatives.

One of their most exciting projects is the Cesar Chavez School for Social Change in Santa Cruz, near where Cesar organized in the fields of Pajaro Valley. Here, future community leaders are raised in the tradition of Cesar Chavez, Martin Luther King, and Mahatma Gandhi. Nineteen-year-old Miriam Garcia is grateful to Nane and others at Barrios Unidos for making it possible for her to

attend the school. “I look forward to becoming a creator of positive change in my community,” she says.

Of course there is still much to do. Some days, Barrios Unidos may seem to be losing the battle. Youth crime in our country is projected to more than double over the next decade, fueled in large part by gang activity. The FBI reports nearly 1.5 million young people are now involved in gangs. For Nane, and Barrios Unidos, that means more lives to turn around, more young people who need more choices for the future. Nane finds hope in young people like Alejandro Vilchez, who is a young father and a warrior for peace. “My father taught me to be a man,” says Alejandro. “Nane taught me to be a warrior for change.”

At fifty-one, Nane is still the guiding spirit of his organization. He works in the office, travels across the country giving speeches and raising funds, and meets with children of the barrios. And he always takes time to pray, honoring the Creator.

In the kitchen of his modest home, Nane snuggles his ten-year-old grandson close and talks of his hopes for peace. “Not for me,” he says, “maybe not for my children. But if we all keep working toward it, maybe for my grandson’s children.”

Nane continues to struggle for the unity of all people and challenges people from all walks of life to help us save our children. To get involved with **Barrios Unidos**, visit their Web site, www.barriosunidos.net.