

A MESSENGER OF HOPE

Told by Nancy Berg

People thought he had lost his mind when he chose to film *American Me* on East L.A.'s most dangerous streets. But growing up in the barrio of Boyle Heights, Edward James Olmos never did follow the rules; he was more likely to create them. Early on, the Latino actor and activist used his head, heart, and talent to find ways to succeed so others could one day follow. He chose his acting roles carefully so he could set an example. As the firm but fair Lieutenant Martin Castillo in *Miami Vice*, he earned great respect. Then, with the film *Stand and Deliver*, he was nominated for an Academy Award for his portrayal of Jaime Escalante, the tough math teacher who taught the lost youth of East L.A. how to earn respect.

When he was ready to direct his first film, he wanted to deliver a strong antidrug and anti-gang message to kids in the barrios—so he went right back to East L.A. Using real gang members as extras and crew, Olmos showed the world the painfully honest reality of their brief, violent lives. For many of these kids, their only ambition was one day to go to San Quentin or Folsom Prison. “They go from being streetwise gang members into prison. When they get out, they think they can start their lives,” Olmos says. “They don’t see alternatives to the gang life. Without skills, and with jobs hard to come by, kids start dealing to make a buck—and gangs control that world.” Olmos gave those young people real jobs, with a real future—and an opportunity to break out of the

gang-banger world. He also wanted to show the little ones—the ones who see everything—that people who look just like them can succeed and make their good dreams come true. “Kids in East L.A., like any kids, need hope. You get hope by having opportunity to see a future, and right now it looks pretty dark,” he says, adding, “I think that role models are the most important thing in these kids’ lives now.”

Olmos has been blessed by role models who showed him that helping others is a way of life—and he carries this tradition on within his own family. His mother, Eleanor, worked for fifteen years in the Los Angeles County General Hospital AIDS ward, and his father, Pedro, helped coordinate Little League baseball in East L.A. His actress wife, Lorraine Bracco, volunteers for a group that provides housing for disabled adults, and their six children helped paint murals in L.A.’s inner-city schools. “It’s all a labor of love,” Olmos says.

Known for his big heart, Olmos often challenges others to share theirs. After the L.A. riots in 1992, he galvanized people from across the city to help clean up the horrific rubble. With the simple gesture of a broom and a dustpan held up on TV, he invited all who were watching to join him, in the streets, day after day, for as long as it took. Then, at the 1994 Democratic National Convention, he challenged the entire nation: “It is the task of all caring adults to be messengers of hope to these disenfranchised youth.”

Olmos is a messenger of hope for thousands of Latino teens like George Sarabia. Before he met Olmos, George had only one goal in life: to come back from prison a hero, having earned his “stripes.” At the young age of twenty-one, he’d been in a gang for seven years, had been

shot, and had lost his brother to gang violence. At first, when he was offered a small part in *American Me*, he refused—afraid of betraying his brother’s memory. But then he thought of his four younger brothers, all living in jail. “If I’m not able to forgive, when will it ever stop?” he asked himself. His decision to work with Eddie and his team was the turning point in his life.

“Eddie helped turn our community upside down,” George says. “He treated me like a human being, and gave me an opportunity to help, and responsibility—for cleaning up the graffiti.” Working with Olmos’s team on *Lives in Hazard* inspired George to begin a new career producing educational videos. “It was as if he took me by the hand and showed me a different life,” he says.

By filming scenes from *American Me* right in East L.A.’s streets and at Folsom Prison, Olmos helped deglamourize the gang world. While he got his message across to the young actors, it wasn’t enough. Even before *American Me* was released, two of the young men from the film crew were killed by rival gangs. When the 1992 L.A. riots nearly destroyed South Central L.A., Eddie decided he had to do something more. Olmos thought that if other young people could see what they’d learned from the gang members who helped make *American Me*, they might decide to change their ways. After persuading the U.S. Department of Justice to fund an educational documentary, Olmos and his team created a real-life drama that showed how the movie was made. Named after the Hazard Grande barrio and the Big Hazard gang, they called the film *Lives in Hazard*. It depicts the strange and tragic choices these young people are forced to make. They also created a study guide

and a national resource guide of organizations, to give teachers, counselors, and ministers the practical tools they need to help “at risk” youth. The team now travels across the country sharing the film with teenagers, giving them a chance to talk about the social power of gangs. “These young people just want to make a mark on the world. They’re in search of identity, a sense of belonging,” Olmos says. “We each have the need to belong. It’s an instinctual part of being human.”

Whether speaking at schools, churches, jails, or juvenile halls, Eddie’s message is the same: “My hope is that after watching *Lives in Hazard*, each of you will be inspired to move beyond what you think is possible for your communities by helping each other take ownership of your lives and your futures.”

Gil Espinozo is another young man who now has a more hopeful future, thanks to his experience with *Lives in Hazard*. After working as a production assistant on the film, he got a job working for a casting director for a film company. His experience gave him more than just on-the-job training; it provided him with a healthy place to be. “I spend a lot of time at the theater,” he says. “They are like a family to me, they accept me for what I am, and I like that.”

When Eddie is praised for his work, he always gives credit to the “real heroes” like Father Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit priest who works with young people in East L.A.’s Dolores Mission Church. “I’ve had to bury and say good-bye to thirty-one young men and women, all killed in this madness called gang-banging,” Father Boyle says. “These were kids I knew well, who were warm, unique, and full of potential. They should not have died so young.”

One young woman who lost her son to gang violence told Father Boyle, “All this violence is about people who are in pain and feel disconnected from each other. We need to show up in these kids’ lives,” Father Boyle says. “Adults need to show up and pay loving attention to these kids. Employers need to show up with jobs for them. Health-care professionals need to show up with compassion and understanding. Leaders and legislators need to show up with a plan to remedy diminished resources in this country. What we could never accomplish alone, we will be able to do together. As a community we can help these young people imagine a better future, and then lead them into it, with confidence and hope.”

Young people like George and Gil can leverage their life experiences to create better futures for themselves as well as others. At twenty-seven, George runs a nonprofit organization, Inner City Focus, which makes violence-prevention programming for TV, shown in five of L.A.’s housing developments through a local cable company. Taking a moment out of his busy life, he pauses to think about his mother, and those who never gave up on him. “Before she died of cancer last year, she got to see that I have a good life—that I’m married and have a family,” he says. “She was happy to know her son had chosen to walk the other way.”

Knowing that young people often listen better to someone their own age, Eddie Olmos sometimes invites George and Gil to share their stories—and their message—with other young people. “We all have choices,” Gil tells them. “You can do whatever you want to do. You don’t have to prove anything to anyone else, just to yourself.” Then he

pauses for a moment and says, with quiet intensity, “Think about it. What you could do. What you could be.”

Whatever you can do to uplift the life of a child is a step in the right direction toward creating true civil rights for children. If you don't have children, find someone else's! Take them to the library, the theater, a picnic in the park. Use your own life to help point a young life in the right direction.

OPRAH WINFREY

Be a messenger of hope to young people in your neighborhood. Give them an opportunity for a better life. To purchase the **Lives in Hazard** study guide and video for your school, church, or community center, contact olmosproductions@hotmail.com.