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## **A Way Out for Every Kind of Trouble**

**By LUIS J. RODRIGUEZ**

I've been doing talks, workshops, and readings in prisons, juvenile facilities, schools, and other venues throughout the country for more than 25 years. Recently a young man in a California juvenile facility nervously sat as I spoke to a group of maximum security youth offenders. This Chicano was a gang member, 15 years old, who had been found guilty of murder in an adult court. He would soon be sent to an adult facility to serve a 25-years-to-life sentence.

In his hands was a personal journal filled with poems. With difficulty, he read one of his poems. It was a triumphant moment. Unfortunately, it was also an immensely sad moment—sad for another life wasted; sad because there's an assumed scarcity of material resources and imagination to help such a young person. I've spent years dealing with troubled men and women because I used to be a violent gang member and drug addict in the 1960s and 1970s. While I've followed the thread of my life to become a well-known writer and activist, most of my homies, other friends, and even family are caught up in the web of La Vida Loca. My own son, Ramiro, a former Chicago gang member, is presently serving a 28-year prison term in Illinois. Poverty, racism, empty cultural and spiritual lives, all contribute to this crisis among our young people. Even sadder is how many of these youth feel they have few if any choices; they end up pulling the strands of this web around themselves, going deeper into the madness as a way to deal with the madness around them. Where are the strong leaders, mentors, families, schools, jobs, and connections that young people need to make healthy choices and thrive?

It's time we imagined another reality for our youth—one where they know their roots and cultures; where they're acknowledged for their gifts and passions; where they have the proper teachings and tools to achieve their goals and dreams.

We don't need any more "raggedy" men in our neighborhoods—men who stand on street corners, exploit the young and unschooled, and who often mistreat or neglect their own families. We need men and women who are solid in the world, who have skills and consciousness to help themselves through their own callings, and who, in turn, help others?

I know what some people are thinking—who cares about that young man's poems? He's a convicted murderer—what about his victims? What about the horror of taking a life that should not have happened regardless of his circumstances?

Well, this young man will pay the price, no doubt about it. But what are we doing to ensure no other capable young man and woman in our poorest, most abandoned neighborhoods are not continually lost to violence, drugs & alcohol, suicide, or depression? We cannot let the social realities for these young people deteriorate, and then blame them for not doing well.

Even if we ceaselessly say to these youngsters, “don’t choose death, drugs, and mediocrity,” we have to do more. We have to organize, learn new strategies and ideas, and work together to better the world that daily births them.

This is going to take a concerted and cohesive effort on all our parts. Young people need real and meaningful options to the debilitating reality too many of them face every day. And we also have to get young people to care enough about themselves and others to turn away from the myriad traps and temptations calling them to their own demise. While it’s true that particular young man did a terrible act, and this should not be forgotten, he still breathes, he still dreams, he still does poetry.

Somewhere beyond the punishment and isolation, we need to find the humanity that can allow him and others to come out of such tragedies and continually enrich our communities with their full, energized, and creative presence.

Juvenile facilities, like schools, used to be places for young people who made mistakes, even the most horrific, to turn their lives around, to find purpose, maturity, and hope. Many kids changed their lives in the rehabilitative efforts of previous generations who understood that young people have minds and spirits that are malleable and capable of great growth, crucial connections, and positive contributions.

We must recapture and renew this vision. We must not just establish industries on the pathologies and addictions in our society. We need to create the deep, long-haul, and permanent conditions for young people, regardless of race, nationality, or social class, to live in equitable, just, and abundant communities. These in turn are the wellspring of poetry, song, art, intelligence, and dance in every child, every human being, every kind of trouble.

*Luis J. Rodriguez is the author of the acclaimed books, Always Running, La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A. and Hearts & Hands: Creating Community in Violent Times, among others. He has worked with gangs and troubled youth in Chicago, Los Angeles, and other communities, including in Mexico, Central America, and Puerto Rico. He is also cofounder of Tia Chucha’s Café & Centro Cultural, a bookstore, café, art gallery, performance space, and workshop center in Los Angeles.*