

# Former gang member walks the highway toward redemption

Wednesday, Aug. 27, 1997 — Sentinel

By DAN WHITE

Special Staff writer

WATSONVILLE — As he

walked and drove through Santa Cruz County, violence prevention worker James Hernandez spoke of locals who died young and suddenly, in acts of random or calculated violence.

He was walking to raise awareness of youth violence. Part of the process was carrying a backpack full of pictures and stories of the dead. These included 9-year-old Jessica Cortez, who died in front of a Pajaro bakery simply for being at the wrong place at the wrong time; and Benny Casares, whose murderer was finally convicted 25 years later.

These were crimes that had long-lasting effects on the community. But James Hernandez, a former hardened gang member who knows what it's like to stab people and leave them for dead, said these tales are "not all that uncommon."

Sometimes, Hernandez, who works with troubled youths in the city of Concord, tells stories about his own life, and his "students, that are wrenching to

---

'I did eight attempted murders. I left some people for dead. I entered a mindset where my conscience was gone.'

---

— James Hernandez

hear. But his walk is also one of redemption.

Tuesday was his 44th birthday, and also the 24th anniversary of his brother Danny's death, in a knife fight that James Hernandez started.

Danny didn't run in gangs. James did. James found himself in a fight that was going out of control. Danny joined in to help him out and got knifed in the neck.

James Hernandez said he's dealt with the feelings of guilt and pain but they are still with him. He wanted to help himself deal with these emotions, and also the strain of working with youngsters who face death on a regular basis.

The journey is from East Los Angeles to Richmond. Technically the trek is 550 miles but Hernandez is walking roughly half of that. Sue

Tackman, who is also on the journey, said the logistics prevented them from walking all of it, including certain sections of freeway.

They also ran into scheduling crunches. On Tuesday, Hernandez addressed prisoners at the Santa Cruz County jail farm in Watsonville in the early afternoon, then had to skip a chunk of his walk to get to the Bayview Hotel in Apos, where he was scheduled to talk.

Bayview held a reception as well as a ceremony for victims of violence.

Hernandez, while walking past apple farms on Freedom Boulevard, commented on the Jessica Cortez tragedy, in which the little girl was gunned down in broad daylight along with her 16-year-old brother, Jorge, who reportedly had gang affiliations. "People were telling me about

it and I wasn't surprised."

Hernandez said, "There was a recent gang killing in Oakland where a seven-year-old got caught in the crossfire. He got hit once in the head, once in the body, with shotgun blasts. You know what kind of a wound a shotgun makes?"

"The boldness of it, that's what scares me," he said.

The 5-foot, 1-inch Hernandez, decked out in an Adidas T-shirt and lightweight walking shoes, spoke carefully and amiably while walking down the street. But he described himself as an intimidating and dangerous person in his younger days, a high school member of a gang called Satan's Sons.

"When there were 30 or 40 of us walking down the street, we wanted to bring that fear," he said, as a curious child across the

street waved at his entourage. "Once you've donned that outfit, you've got to live it out."

By the time he was 16, he was stabbing and beating people. He still recalls the screams of a man he stabbed through the forearm and stomach. "I did eight attempted murders," he said, holding his head low as he walked. "I left some people for dead. I entered a mindset where my conscience was gone."

A truck rolled by, then a school bus. Hernandez catches up to his mother, Alice Hernandez of San Pablo, who drove down to be with her son that day.

"I understand what he's doing," she said, as she watched him walk. Her thoughts were with both James Hernandez, and his brother, Danny, the one who died in the knife fight all those years ago.

"At this point I have happy memories," she said. "It took me years of thinking I'd never smile again. I wasn't suicidal. I just didn't want to wake up in the morning. But you learn to live with it. James had to do the same thing."