

Homegirl Café

Turning around lives
in Los Angeles

by Kaile Shilling

ITS BRIGHT BLUE walls welcome you through the entrance, followed by an airy yellow that greets you as you enter the main dining area. The colorful art on the walls, the floor-to-ceiling windows, the hum of servers, chatting customers, and good smells coming from the open kitchen create an atmosphere as vibrant, fresh, and unexpected as the food itself.

This is the Homegirl Café, a training program for at-risk, recently released, and formerly gang-impacted young women in Los Angeles. An enterprise of Homeboy Industries, the nation's largest gang-intervention program and a social ministry of the Society of Jesus, Homegirl Café offers more than chipotle salsa, cilantro pesto, and a jicama, green pepper, and roasted corn salad; it offers hope to those who too often have been left behind.

As founder and executive director of Homeboy Industries, Fr. Greg Boyle, SJ, says, "we need to stand with the marginalized until the margins themselves disappear. No one should be outside our circle of compassion."

Homeboy Industries traces its roots to Jobs For A Future, a jobs program created in 1988 by Boyle that offered alternatives to gang violence in a tough Los Angeles neighborhood. Boyle recognized that while gang members are typically male, gang-impacted young women are overlooked. These are the women often struggling to hold a home together and to provide a stable place for their children while their brothers, boyfriends, fathers, and children can be involved in gangs. In 2004, Boyle partnered with Chef Patty Zarate, whose fresh take on traditional Mexican recipes made her storefront café a local favorite, and the Homegirl Café was born.

Now located in Homeboy's expanded headquarters, the café has tripled in size, offers full-scale catering (they recently handled a sit-down dinner for 500), and is expanding to include dinners on weekends.

Come in, and you might be greeted by Ana, or Stephanie, or Annel. Annel was in trouble, and headed for more. Hanging with her "homies," using drugs, struggling with anger issues and the burden of supporting her mother and sister, she found her way to Homeboy Industries, where Boyle hired her to work in the café. In addition to her restaurant work schedule, she is enrolled in on-site anger management and GED classes. She has quit drugs, settled down, and opened her own bank account. She says she likes working for her own money, and she has stabilized the home where, at age nineteen, she still supports her family. Thanks to the support services and mentoring at Homeboy, she's starting to think beyond the day-to-day life she had known and to imagine a


FR. MIKE DOLAN



You'll find Homegirl Café inside Homeboy Industries on Bruno and Alameda in Los Angeles, where breakfasts and lunches with a Mexican flair are on the menu. Staffers are drawn from the ranks of women adversely affected by gangs.

future for herself. She is working with Homeboy staff to get certified as a drug and alcohol counselor. Based on her own experience, she wants to be an example of the fact that people can change.

Ana and Stephanie can tell similar stories. Ana is overseeing the café's organic garden and enrolled in UCLA's master gardener class, and Stephanie was one of five homegirls who spoke on a panel at a women's leadership development conference in Syracuse.

By offering a positive alternative to gang life and the accompanying violence, Homegirl Café helps Annel and other young women and girls like her to create stronger families, make better choices for themselves, break the cycle of poverty, and increase their self-confidence, making them better leaders and heads of household. 

Kaile Shilling works in the development office of Homeboy Industries.

www.homeboy-industries.org