

YVONNE ABRAHAM

Saved by God, art

By Yvonne Abraham | June 22, 2008

Nestor Martino lay on the corner of Ruggles Street and Raynor Circle, bleeding. And blaming himself.

Why did he try to take on 10 guys from a rival crew alone? Why did he go after them a second time after they pummeled him? Why didn't he wait until he had his pistol?

"I was that living-legend-type dude," he said, recalling the 2005 incident. "There are 10 of them and I'm coming off like I'm Superman. I wasn't going to take disrespect."

Martino had been a bully since elementary school, pulling his first flip-knife at 9. When not fighting for respect, he said he and his gang beat up people in Dorchester and Chelsea for money. He became a Blood, did time for stabbing a Crip.

Life on the street was an endless, escalating chain of retaliations.

Now Martino was 16, a seasoned thug, and shot, his right leg shattered. Cars rolled by. A man in a yellow hard hat walked on, trying not to see the slight Puerto Rican kid with the long braids and the hard face.

This was not the Nestor Martino they knew at Artists For Humanity, the South Boston youth center that recognized his talent and paid him to paint every afternoon. It was not the Nestor Martino who sold his first portrait from a Newbury Street gallery when he was 14. It was not the Nestor Martino who was always ready with advice for other aspiring artists.

"There are 24 hours in a day," Martino says. "I'd sleep for eight, work at Artists for Humanity for three and gang-bang the rest of the day."

He would disappear from the center for long stretches, too busy on the streets to bother with art.

A couple of months after the shooting, Martino was back in his old Dorchester neighborhood. He had his .22 and his bullets, jangling in his pockets.

He never used them. In March of 2006, police stopped him and found the gun. He expected six easy months in youth detention. But he was 17 then, and tried as an adult. Shocked, Nestor Martino was sent to South Bay for a year.

And that did something for him that the school suspensions and the detention centers and the gunshots and the caring mentors at Artists For Humanity had not yet managed.

In his first hours in an adult jail, he realized he was headed straight into a lifetime of pointless violence. He began to wonder if some other kind of life might be possible. "I started praying," he says. "From here it was going to be 10 times worse. I had dreams I wanted to see flourish. I wanted people to know me for good stuff."

Things didn't change overnight. But during his time in jail, Martino cut off his braids, joined a prayer group, kept his Bible close. He got his GED, spent hours in the library, started drawing again.

About a year ago, Martino got out, and he went straight to Peoples Baptist Church in Roxbury to see Dana Gonsal, who had ministered to him in South Bay. And he returned to Artists For Humanity on West Second Street. God and art anchor him now.

Dorchester can be a small place. He sees old enemies around, but they don't recognize him, he says. He looks younger somehow. He smiles and he dresses differently. And he will go out of his way to avoid confrontation.

"I know what I'm living for," he says. "I'm on the battlefield, and I'm going to keep on fighting."

In September, Nestor Martino will leave all of it even further behind to study art at the prestigious Cooper Union in Manhattan.

"I feel like I'll stand out in more than one way," he says.

He already does.

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