

Opening Story, Unit 6: A Mother of Four

I wish you could have met my mother. She was 95 years old when she passed and just about the sweetest person I knew. Mother was a "prayer warrior." Phrases like, *Salt of the Earth*, come to mind when I think of my Mom. My folks lived in Covina, California, a middle-class suburb in Los Angeles County. They've lived in the same house for some 50 years, the house in which I grew up. When I would visit, I'd just open the door and yell, *Hello*. On one such visit, I interrupted one of my mother's prayer group meetings. I apologized to the group and intended to keep walking into the family room, but I just kept staring at this group of women. They were all clones of my mother. When the group finished, and I hugged my mother to say hello, I felt I should hug each one of them as well. *How do you do that, Mom? How do you surround yourself with women who are exactly like you?* Mom would giggle and shrug her shoulders.

When my mother called me at home a short time later and said that one of her friends had been shot, I was shocked. *In a hunting accident or something like that*, I asked? *No*, she answered. My mother's friend was at home and asleep in bed. At about 2:30 AM, the front door of her house was kicked in. Then her bedroom door was kicked in. Two 16-year-old boys stood at the foot of her bed and leveled a shotgun on her. *Where is your son*, they asked? She didn't lie. *He is not here*, she said. Without uttering another word, they shot my mother's friend from a distance of about 12 feet.

I had recently retired from law enforcement in Southern California, so my mother asked me to find out whatever I could about the shooting. I called the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department and talked with the investigator handling the case. The investigator filled me in on the details and confirmed the son was a member of a local gang. I said that I had been out of law enforcement for a while, but I had worked the gang detail. Mothers of all gang members were off-limits. Had that changed? The investigator said that the incident was the second purposeful shooting of a mother of a gang member in the last 90 days.

I hung up the telephone and just stood there for a while, letting it all sink in. My mother's friend was such a sweet, caring woman. How could her son be a member of a violent street gang? How does a 16-year-old justify shooting a mother of four as she lays in her bed? None of it made any sense. Was it just the natural progression of violence?

When we think of youth gangs or youth violence, we generally picture inner-city kids or low-income families. Unfortunately, youth gangs and violence are on the rise in all neighborhoods across the country. The good news is, as parents, there is a *lot* we can do about it.

Let's dig in!