

SPOTLIGHT ON...

Homeboy Industries

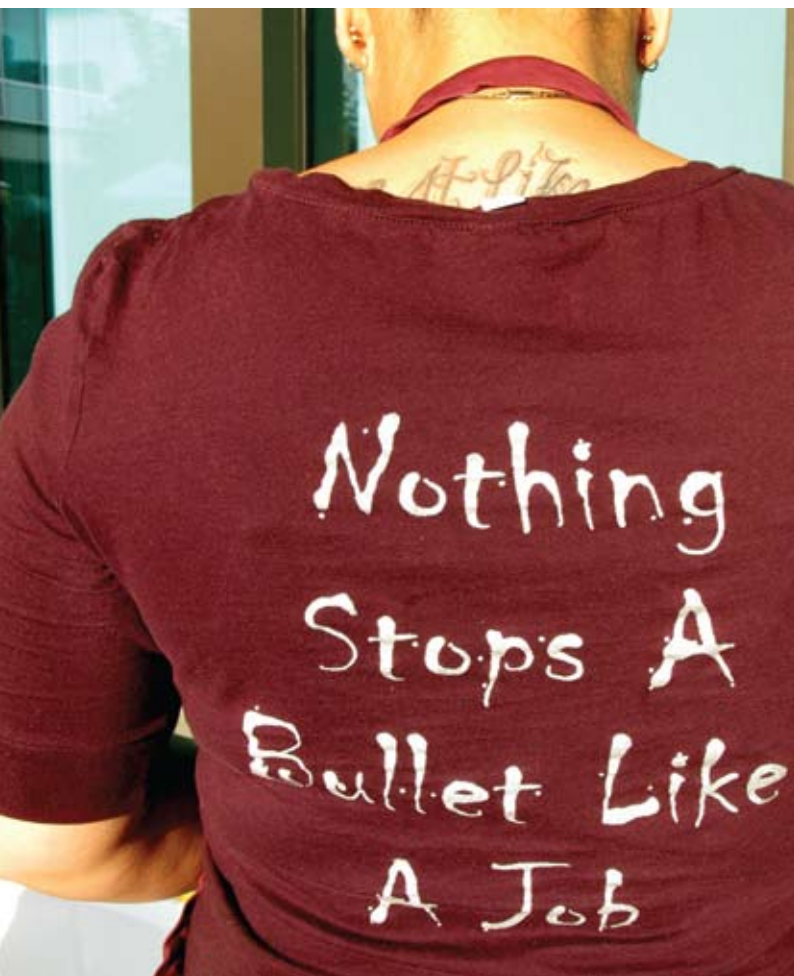
BY ERIN CUMBERWORTH

In mid-May of this year, Homeboy Industries, one of the most publicized gang intervention programs in the United States, announced that it was in financial trouble. A Los Angeles nonprofit that hires former gang members, Homeboy Industries found itself \$5 million in debt and was forced to lay off 300 employees, including its entire senior staff. Among those left without a paycheck was the Reverend Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest who founded the program in 1988 and has led it ever since. Many employees promised Father Boyle they would keep working without pay, eager to help the organization that had helped them, and for now, many of Homeboy's services will continue to operate with volunteer labor. But that arrangement cannot go on indefinitely.

When we decided to feature Homeboy Industries in *Pathways*, we were unaware of the organization's financial crisis. We were drawn to Homeboy for the same reason so many others have been drawn to it: its relentless focus on jobs and job training as a way out of the gang lifestyle. Because Homeboy recognizes that former gang members are not always welcomed into the regular labor force, the innovative tack they have taken is to build their own Homeboy labor market based on a number of successful businesses. The oldest of the businesses is Homeboy Bakery, where seasoned bakers teach trainees to make bread, cookies, cakes, and more. Next door to the bakery is Homegirl Café, staffed by female former gang members, which serves fresh organic vegetables from its own garden. Homeboy Merchandise sells clothing, backpacks, and other products bearing the Homeboy and Homegirl logos. The largest business is Homeboy Silkscreen & Embroidery, where hundreds of employees have produced custom items for church groups, schools, and other clients. In addition to its small businesses, Homeboy offers a variety of other services to its clients, including a charter high school, free tattoo removal, and a training program for installing solar panels. According to Father Boyle, this latter program has a long waiting list because it's one of only a handful of its kind in California.

Until recently, Homeboy seemed to be thriving. According

A Homegirl Cafe employee wears the Homeboy Industries philosophy.



VICTORIA BERNAL



BBC WORLD SERVICE

A Homeboy Industries employee works at the Homeboy Bakery.

to data cited by Father Boyle, the small businesses are self-sufficient, and all together, the program has worked with over 12,000 gang members since its inception. Elements of Homeboy's programs have been replicated in places as far away as Denmark and Uruguay, and the organization has regularly attracted attention from national media like the *New York Times* and National Public Radio.

So what went wrong? We had a chance to speak to Father Boyle recently about the source of the crisis, and he pointed to the recession and the recent, poorly timed expansion of Homeboy's services. Because the number of clients using Homeboy's services had been steadily growing, a decision was made to move its headquarters to a new building, and this decision, coupled with a significant decline in private donations, led to the layoffs.

This decline in giving is of course part of a larger recession-induced trend. In a recent analysis of charitable giving during the recession, the Stanford Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality showed that, for the country as a whole, total charitable donations have fallen sharply. Although many direct-relief organizations, like food banks and shelters, have overcome the larger trend and continue to be supported at high levels, that may be because these organizations are seen as catering to the "deserving" poor. In other words, we continue to give to food

banks because we regard them as serving people who, through no fault of their own, are suffering from a faltering economy. But Homeboy's clientele tends to end up on the wrong side of this division in the public mind between the deserving and undeserving. In a recent interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Father Boyle conjectured, "If these were puppies or little kids, we wouldn't be in this trouble. But they're tattooed gang members with records."

If Homeboy Industries does not survive, Los Angeles will essentially default to a very different approach to addressing gang violence. Although the city has a generous budget for gang intervention programs, most of that budget has been directed toward programs that try to broker peace between competing gangs. The problem with relying only on this approach, Father Boyle suggests, is that it doesn't address the main reason why gangs exist and can successfully recruit. We will always have gangs as long as gang members are unable to get jobs and forge meaningful lives outside of them. As Father Boyle puts it, gang violence is not about men trying to kill one another, but about men trying to die. "There is an absence of hope," he explains, and he insists that addressing that hopelessness is the only way to effectively reduce gang violence in the long term.

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