



PRESIDENT'S PAGE

MICHAEL L. BARONI

GRIP of Orange County Angels

Do guardian angels exist? In Orange County, they take a multi-faceted, community-focused approach to protecting kids from gangs.

Orange County is home to over 700 street gangs. In our poorest neighborhoods, children are vulnerable to gang involvement. "Gang recruitment starts at an early age—eight to twelve years old," says District Attorney Tony Rackauckas.

Tracy Miller, Assistant District Attorney, explains, "gangs offer these kids quick cash, structure with rules, and a sense of belonging. Things they're not getting elsewhere."

To combat this pipeline into gangs, the District Attorney's office and Anaheim Police Department formed the Gang Reduction Intervention Partnership, or "GRIP." 2017 marks the tenth anniversary of GRIP's powerful, helping hand. GRIP has steered over 10,000 students away from gangs, and into productive lives.

Miller relays the story of Ricky, a street-hardened sixth-grader about to be initiated into a gang. Ricky told Miller, and four accompanying police officers, to "f--k off." They politely declined. Instead, they mentored Ricky. They put him into a soccer club, which became his new obsession. They tutored him and enrolled his parents in classes. Ricky connected with a Big Brother, and Ricky's life turned around. Years later, when he earned his first paycheck, from his first-ever job, he bought Miller two dozen yellow roses. "Flowers will never again be that meaningful," she says.

Miller has led the GRIP team from inception, overseeing thirty full-time staff (including investigators, case managers, and probation officers): "It's my life's work." GRIP's reach has exponentially spread, thanks to its devoted volunteers, which include district attorneys, law enforcement, parents, teachers, churches, and 300 community partners. GRIP's approach is to swarm children with multi-pronged, personal outreach and proactive intervention. District attorneys and law enforcement officers train teachers how to identify gang culture in schools (identify certain tattoos, "street names," sign language, and certain clothing). Case workers visit children's homes and help parents be parents. Teachers mentor and tutor. Anti-gang "greeters" (volunteer parents) high-five kids as they arrive at school each day, creating a happy vibe to counteract gang influence and graffiti.

Miller relates how law enforcement personnel often donate their

own time and money to help children succeed. Volunteers drive kids to school, buy groceries, watch a child's athletic event when a parent cannot attend, and even pay for kids to go to summer camp. Volunteers arrange for taekwondo classes, sports leagues, and other after-school activities. Kids are also kept focused through truancy and curfew sweeps, allowing GRIP to interface with parents.

The overriding goal of GRIP is to instill children with enough integrity, self-esteem, and a sense of individual responsibility that they will believe in—and fight for—a better life for themselves. Miller says that "creating hope" in a child is critical. To that end, GRIP deploys reward-incentives to promote good habits and behavior. Miller says, "We teach kids that everything good in life must be earned." Thus, for children who demonstrate excellent school attendance, academic improvement, and model behavior, GRIP's community partners step in to provide motivational rewards. For example, Ford Motor Company mentors 100 GRIP kids annually. Ford teaches them about automobile design and production, gives tours of Ford facilities, and helps kids to envision exciting career possibilities.

Operation Turkey Leg provides free Thanksgiving meals to over 800 children, and is supported by, among others: Ralph's, Walmart, Saddleback Church, and My Safe Harbor. Zitlalic Domond (Program Director of Anaheim GRIP) adds that there is another benefit to providing food: "Seeing uniformed police officers deliver Thanksgiving meals in gang-infested neighborhoods [builds trust] with law enforcement."

The Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim baseball team has been a true "grand slam" community partner. Spearheaded by Tim Mead, Vice President of Communications, the Angels welcome 2,000 GRIP kids each year as "VIP" guests. The children enjoy a game, meet players, mingle with over 100 uniformed sheriffs and police officers from across Orange County, enjoy delectable food, and have an unusually carefree, memorable day. Mead describes the meaning in this event:

Most of these kids have never been to a stadium, and watching them get excited to interact with law enforcement is so

emotional. These kids beam with pride and feel so special. What Tracy (Miller) and Tony (Rackauckas) have done is just extraordinary. . . . Law enforcement are true heroes to these kids, their families, and our communities. It's an inspiration for all of us at the Angels.

Miller refers to Mead as a "true angel for our kids," who touches their lives in a way that will "forever inspire them." Indeed, many of the children are so excited by the prospect of attending an event with the Angels that they become motivated to stay on track all year. You might say that the "grip of angels" catches these children before they fall too far, and lifts them up to where they can get a foothold, and climb to greater heights. Guardian angels do exist. A whole team of them, right here in our backyard, helping our kids build a brighter future.



Tracy Miller and law enforcement



Michael L. Baroni is the 2017 OCBA President. He can be reached at united@ocba.org.