

GROW

OPPORTUNITIES FOR

AT HOMEBOY INDUSTRIES, A NEW BAKERY, CAFÉ, AND CLASSROOMS CREATE JOB AND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN.

by Susan Wampler Photography by Manuello Paganelli

For two decades, Father Gregory Boyle, S.J., has been giving new hope and a fresh start to thousands of former gang members and at-risk youth through Homeboy Industries. So it's fitting that Homeboy got its own fresh start last fall, by opening a gleaming new 21,000-square-foot headquarters that brings the nonprofit's business entities and support services together under one roof for the first time.

But rebuilding lives remains the heart and soul of Homeboy's mission. The two-story, \$8.5-million complex, with its sleek glass and bright paint, shines like the beacon of opportunity it symbolizes for those seeking a way out of the harsh existence of gang life. Located on a once-blighted lot on the north edge of downtown Los Angeles, at Bruno and Alameda streets, this is neutral territory for the city's estimated 600 gangs, one of the factors involved in choosing the site. Some 1,000 people come through these doors every month seeking services or jobs in one of Homeboy's small businesses.



At Homeboy's new headquarters, Anthony Keys (right center) and Alfredo Hernandez create breads and pastries in the Homeboy Bakery.

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HOMIES IN L.A.





Marcos Luna presents a tray of freshly baked muffins.

EXPERIENCING UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

Seven years ago, one of those looking for refuge and a new start was Joseph Holguin, who grew up in Aliso Village, a notorious public housing project plagued by eight rival gangs. His sister and brothers all belonged to gangs, as did his father, a heroin addict who died of an overdose.

Joseph fell prey to gang life and drug abuse at a young age, selling crack on a street corner at age 10. By 14, he had fathered a child, become a full-blown drug addict, was shot for the first time, and landed in juvenile detention. At 15, he was shot again. “My homies were planning funerals, not weddings,” he recalls. “As far as I could see down the street was as far as I could see my future.”

Joseph met Fr. Boyle when he was 9 and again while he was serving time in the state penitentiary. After his release at age 21, he called Fr. Boyle asking for a job. “He said, ‘I’ve been waiting for your call.’ He showed us something we’d never known before: unconditional love,” says Joseph.

Today at 29, Joseph is a peer navigator, one of four Homeboy leaders trained by the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department to form connections with incarcerated gang members so they have a place to turn after their release, rather than getting drawn back into gang life. Launched at the end of 2007, the program has been so successful that there are already plans to

train four peer navigators for the women’s facilities.

Because the navigators come from the same background, they get a much better response. “It’s peer to peer. They’re able to talk in a very different way,” says Kaile Shilling, associate director of development for Homeboy Industries.

FOSTERING GROWTH AND SERVICE

Homeboy Industries traces its roots to Jobs for a Future, a program created in 1988 by Fr. Boyle while he was serving as pastor of the Dolores Mission parish in Boyle Heights. Homeboy became an independent nonprofit in 2001 and has since grown into a national model.

Its first business enterprise—Homeboy Bakery—was lost in an electrical fire in 1999. “When the original bakery burned down, there was a tremendous outpouring of support from the community,” says Kaile. “We used [the donations] to buy the land for a new bakery. But it became clear to everyone that we needed larger headquarters.”

Planning for a new building allowed the staff, which now numbers 260, to dream big. A larger facility would give Homeboy’s businesses room to grow. Bringing everything together in one space also would be a godsend to clients, making it easier for them to attend training, classes, and counseling sessions.

A \$12-million capital campaign made the dream a reality, funding construction and startup costs for the businesses to expand. In October 2007, the building was dedicated as the Fran and Ray Stark Center, named for the late film producer and his wife whose foundation was a major donor to the campaign.

FEEDING BODY AND MIND

On a sunny Southern California afternoon, young men in Homeboy T-shirts are cleaning the windows and making the headquarters sparkle. Those same T-shirts, along with tote bags, mugs, and other Homeboy/Homegirl merchandise are on sale in a shop just off of the lobby.

Next to the shop is the new 86-seat Homegirl Café, teeming with a large lunchtime crowd. Patrons of the popular café can watch the Homegirls in action at the demonstration kitchen, making signature specialties such as Angela’s Green Potion (mint-spinach limeade) or tacos filled with delicacies ranging from *carnitas* to tofu and served with a variety of fresh salsas or jalapeño pesto. The café, staffed by 28 Homegirls, has won raves from *O Magazine* and the *Los Angeles Times*. It serves breakfast and lunch, but there are plans to add dinner service soon. A separate kitchen supports the café’s rapidly growing catering component. The aroma of freshly baked bread permeates the air while display cases brim with tempting pastries, all made in the resurrected Homeboy Bakery at the rear of the building.

To prepare for the 5,000-square-foot bakery’s reopening, a core group of six bakers attended Los Angeles Trade-Technical College to become certified bakers, then interned at another

bakery. Now as supervisors of Homeboy Bakery, they oversee nine other bakers and two pastry chefs. The bakery has contracts to supply local restaurants and upscale grocers. “We’re negotiating a couple of new contracts now, then we’ll need more bakers,” says Kaile. “We’re also developing packaging to get the Homeboy brand into supermarkets.”

Other fixtures on the ground floor include case-management services; job-development offices where 300 clients each month hone their interview, resume, and job-readiness skills; and a tattoo-removal clinic where 250 clients each month participate in the removal process that can take up to two years to complete.

Upstairs are two classrooms, a large computer center, and an expanded mental health program. Because the counselors are on site, in a safe environment, the program supports a traditionally hard-to-reach client base. The classrooms and computer lab have greatly broadened Homeboy’s education components which range from G.E.D. preparation to learning effective life skills such as parenting, basic finances and budgeting, and

household management. Homeboy also recently started a charter high school on site, with 23 students pursuing their diploma.

As Homeboy continues to grow, Kaile says priorities include transitional housing to help those who can’t put together their first and last months’ rent or have trouble leasing an apartment because of their criminal record. Daycare services are also needed. “It’s a major factor in many women being able to hold a job,” notes Kaile.

As for Homeboy’s founder, Fr. Boyle recently took a much-deserved sabbatical. Kim Sifford, in charge of maintenance for the café, says “He is the soul of the place.” 🌟

Homegirl Café, 130 W. Bruno Street, Los Angeles, is open for breakfast and lunch Monday through Saturday from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. For information on catering service, call (213) 256-9809. Homeboy Bakery breads and pastries may be purchased at the café.

Homeboy Industries welcomes your support. For more information, go to <http://www.homeboy-industries.org/donations.php>



KIM SIFFORD (FAR LEFT) AND ANA ESPINOZA ARE COWORKERS IN THE CHEERY NEW HOMEGIRL CAFÉ.

FINDING A HOME AT HOMEGIRL CAFÉ

Although Kim Sifford, 21, and Ana Espinoza, 24, had never met before working at the Homegirl Café, they shared many experiences: an early upbringing in South Central Los Angeles, troubled relationships with their parents, and eventually run-ins with the law.

When Kim was in fifth grade, her mother moved the family to the west side to pursue a better environment and education. At 17, she secured a full-time job, but because the family depended on public assistance, her mother kicked her out of the house when she wouldn’t give up the position to prevent a cutoff of benefits.

“I was on the streets for a little while,” Kim recalls. Desperate, she committed a robbery and wound up serving four years. While incarcerated, she met Father Gregory Boyle, S.J. After she was paroled and attending a drug-rehabilitation group, the supervisor wrote Homeboy Industries on the board. “I came the same day,” she says. “It was not a coincidence. Right now, this is where I need to be.”

Now, with an associate’s degree and 30-some hours of community college under her belt, Kim supports her 14-year-old brother as a dependent. Eventually, she plans to earn a bachelor’s degree and dreams of becoming a graphic artist and designer. She is enrolled in a Homeboy partnership with Otis College, designing Homeboy and Homegirl dolls.

Ana Espinoza had a rough childhood, too. When she was 10, her 17-year-old half brother was killed in gang violence. Her father was an alcoholic prone to physical abuse. “Sometimes my dad didn’t come home for days,” she recalls. “It was always just my mom taking care of us.”

As a young adult, Ana was arrested for domestic violence and battery (both stemming from a fight with her boyfriend) as well as theft and disturbing the peace. “I had nowhere to go. Homeboy helped me get on my feet,” she says.

While both Kim and Ana earn salaries for working in the café, Homeboy Industries provides them with more than a job. “Everyone here is very helpful and seems to really care,” says Ana. “I love working here. It’s like home, my second home.”