

Convict says gang bad family substitute

DEAR ABBY: I'm a 16-year-old gangbanger looking at spending the rest of my life isolated in a little bird cage. Every day I ask myself the same question. Was it really worth throwing my life away? All I did was help keep a "homeboy" from getting hurt. I got caught and was convicted on eight charges that led to more than four consecutive life sentences. That ain't no joke! The sad part of it is that the so-called homeboy turned his back on me when I needed him most. I should've pulled away when I could've.

The main reason for this letter is to help parents and teens like myself who are choosing the wrong path to realize what you're getting into while there is still time. Tell parents out there, if you see your kid is messing up in school, using drugs, hanging with the wrong crowd, anything that would lead to gang affiliation, reach out and help them while you still can before they're in too deep. They (teens) turn toward gang life in

search of the love they need from their family. Or they want to fit in and be cool.

To all the gangbangers who think you're cool and being a gangster, get away from it while you still can. It may be fun at the moment, but it's not when you get caught and you have to spend the rest of your life behind bars. There's

better things to do in life than hang around all day frying your brain from all the drugs and alcohol. Trust me, when you're behind bars thinking about what you did, you'll be missing your family the most. You think your homeboys are going to be there for you? Well, let me tell you this ... they're not! I guarantee you that the only people who are actually willing to change places with you are your parents. Your real family. Do you think your homeboys want to do time for you? Hell, no!

I hope this letter helps some people out there. I just want to make a contribution to society before I get locked up in the dungeon

forever. This is to show you not all gangbangers are evil and cruel. Life is short. Live it smart, not stupid. Now I can finally answer the question I ask myself, "Was it all worth it?" The money, the girls and all the material things go faster than you think and could all be taken away with the snap of a finger from the split second of a decision you make. It's not worth your life.

Homesick Homeboy

DEAR HOMESICK: You write well, and your letter contains a powerful message. I'm printing it without editing. Let your experience be a warning to others. I hope from the sad circumstances of your life some other young person will realize that a gang is a poor substitute for a family and the path to success does not stop at the street corner.

If a troubled young person is in school, he or she should talk to a counselor. If there is a church nearby, talk to a priest or minister. There are alternatives to joining a gang, but you need to reach out.

DEAR ABBY: Last week a dear friend, Betty, passed away. She was a former neighbor and the kindest, gentlest, most patient

soul I ever met. Although she was twice my age, we became good friends — proof that age knows no boundaries.

Two days after Betty died, I was on a work break. I had been thinking about her all morning and how she had influenced my life. Just then I saw a penny on the floor and picked it up. It was a 1992 penny — the year Betty and I first met. I knew right then it was a message from her letting me know she is OK. I'll carry that penny with me always in remembrance of her.

Abby, this letter is my tribute to her, and a reminder to all who read it:

Cherish your friends. You never know how long they — or you — will be around.

Tom, Santa Maria, Calif.

DEAR TOM: That's true. And it's why we should make the most of every day and spend each one wisely.

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Jeanne Phillips

DEAR ABBY