



The Peace Alliance
Campaign to Establish a

U.S. Department of Peace



Student Peace Alliance

Voices of Hope *When Violence is Transformed*

Kevin Sanchez, 21 years old **Peace Warrior**

Early on in my life I was faced with many negative experiences. My father and mother were avid drug and alcohol users. There [were] many fights and violence occurred in and around my home. Those negative experiences had a very profound influence on how I acted and lived. In addition to the plight that was in my family there was much community anguish in the form of addiction, drugs, gangs and death.

At a very young age I was faced with the decision that changed my life forever. I decided to enter in to the world of neighborhood gangs. I used drugs, carried weapons, fought and put my life in danger. I saw friends and family go to jail, stabbed, shot, and associates killed.

Over time, I decided to change my life for many different reasons. I saw the sadness in my father's eyes due to worry, I saw my girlfriend afraid for my life, and I saw that I was becoming a person that was not me. I made a choice to step away from that lifestyle.

At that pivotal moment **Barrios Unidos** came into my life. They were able to do something that no other organization or programs had ever done. They helped me transform my mentality towards life. They helped me see that my culture is the cure to my self-hatred, violence and addiction. They were able to help me develop as a leader, spokesperson for youth that have no voice, advocate and Peace Warrior.

I and so many other young people at the time were willing to risk life and limb to gain respect and love in a world of

disillusionment. I now know that I share a common bond with all those that enter and leave the gangs. I see them now as my brothers and sisters. I would have gone back to my past ways if it was not for the foundation of and strong-willed people from Barrios Unidos. I would have ended up killing someone or being killed. This foundation is the key to how Barrios Unidos was able to help me.

As an advocate now, I see that there is not enough funding for organizations like Barrios Unidos.

One of my life passions at the moment is working with youth that have been there and done that to help them see a better light and life. As of now, we are teaching the young people about the **Youth PROMISE Act**, and how it will revolutionize the way young people are served in the community. It will open thousands of doors to youth who have been dehumanized, demonized and scrutinized by the media and greater community. It will give them an avenue to success and change.

I have made a decision since I was 17 years old that I will devote my time and energy to stopping the violence that I have seen and heard of not only in my community but everywhere. It will be possible through the energy of the youth and responsible agencies that support legislation such as the Youth PROMISE Act in saving our children from death.

This is but a fraction of how and what I represent, but there is a lifetime to get to know each other. In Peace, Kevin.



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Thomas Hill

Thomas Hill was part of a team that developed and implemented a training workshop at Columbia University's Center for International Conflict Resolution in which two dozen mid-level leaders of rival Iraqi groups, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), participated in October 2000. These political groups had a particularly contentious relationship vying for control in Northern Iraq.

Over the course of a month-long training, the participants learned various conflict management and dispute resolution skills and found ways to communicate constructively with each other just two years after being on opposite sides of a deadly civil war. Tom and his colleagues conducted a follow-up training with the same group in Lebanon in the summer of 2001. Both these trainings were funded by the U.S. State Department, but additional funding for follow up trainings and evaluation was denied.

In 2007, when Tom was visiting Sulaimani, Iraq a man came up to him at a café. "Tom! It's so good to see you! Do you recognize me? I'm Jamal! I participated in your peacebuilding training at Columbia in 2000. I have to thank you for it."

Jamal mentioned that he was by then the spokesperson for the deputy prime minister of the Kurdistan region. At that time, the PUK and the KDP were working to form a joint government to administer the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Jamal told Tom that one of the major reasons that the joining of the two administrations into one had gone as smoothly and peacefully as it had was because there were influential figures on both sides who had been part of the group that participated in the Columbia workshops in 2000-01. They knew the proper skills and approaches to help manage conflict peacefully and transform it into a constructive force.

At a time when Iraq was at its most violent, the Kurdistan Region was its most peaceful area. The two Kurdish parties still had a difficult history and tension between them was palpable, but they were working together, engaging in dialogue and not resorting to violence.

"I just wanted you to know that our work with you at Columbia is a big part of the reason things are going so well," Jamal told Tom. "Thank you!"

Thomas Hill is leader of the Nahwa Al-Salaam project at Columbia University's Center for International Conflict Resolution. He has been engaged in peacebuilding initiatives with Iraqis since 2000 and has traveled to Iraq 18 times since 2003.