

## Biography

Jose Gonzales, native to the Phoenix area, is a 20 year old alumnus of foster care that spent some of his youth in the juvenile justice system. He is currently under supervision of Child Protective Services. He has recently accepted a position as a Case Manager in a local group home. Jose feels strongly that his experiences have allowed him to better understand the struggles of youth in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, with the ultimate goal of providing support in developing a positive future for system involved youth.

## Testimony

I want to thank the members of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Task Force on Policing for allowing me to present testimony today.

Speaking from the heart is very important to me. I come to you today to share my experiences and struggles, as they relate to the child welfare and juvenile justice system. Providing some background is important, as it has shaped me into who I am today.

I am a life-long resident of Maricopa County.

I first ran away when I was 7 years old, at about the same time my father passed away. His death didn't have a big impact on me because he never played a role in my life. He was absent – simply never there. I got involved with drug use, and at age 9, I went to jail for smoking marijuana. I made some bad decisions as a young boy. One time, my brother and I decided to throw rocks at passing cars from a freeway overpass. Unfortunately, one of the rocks hit a young kid in the passenger's seat of a passing car and severely injured him. This reckless and criminal act resulted in me being placed on probation, for which I violated on numerous occasions. I got involved with a gang. These actions resulted in my spending a time in a juvenile detention facility, as well as three months at a Boys Ranch.

This is just a part of my story. It is important that you understand the family support structure that existed for me as a young person. Growing up in a single parent family as one of five kids, my mother struggled with how to best support us. As rowdy kids, my siblings and I would get us kicked out of apartments on a regular basis. Living in hotels on and off for several years, my mother would do whatever she had to get money to provide for us- so we would have a hotel room to call home for the night. Living in a hotel with my mom and four siblings and two dogs and her boyfriend was a challenge, to say the least.

Needless to say, I have had a fair amount of interaction with law enforcement in my youth. Some has been very positive. Like the time that a School Resource Officer got me involved in an after school club. Officer Bill D. helped me stop being a bad kid- assisted with after school activities. He sought me out to be a part of a club that included all sorts of youth- athletes, academics, and helped me gain confidence in reaching out to other social circles beyond my troubled community.

The important idea I'd like to convey is that approach is everything. Coming from a lot of trauma in my past, it is important that law enforcement be sensitive to the issues that can exist in a young person's life.

An example of an approach that was not so positive is when I was 6 or 7 years old, cops slammed my older brother down on the ground for mischief – he ended up with scratches on his face. The tough part was not that part, but the fact that he was calling us little bastards, as well as many other bad words. This is very hurtful.

Another issue I see is the fact that I am always approached by officers with a mindset of “what is the quickest way to get me down.” Admittedly, I am a big guy that could be imposing. However, officers always have their hand on their gun most of the time when they are in my presence.

The main recommendation I have would be for law enforcement to work to be more respectful of individuals they are engaged with. I want to be treated with respect and fairness, and not be looked at as a criminal, but as a productive member of the community.

I just want everyone to hear me heart to heart, not just in one ear and out the other because there are a lot of other young adults out there just like me that are trying to better themselves.

I have a lot of family currently in prison, including two of my brothers, six cousins, and two uncles. One of my cousins is serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole for murder. Other family members float in and out of the justice system and some are still under custody of Child Protective Services. I, myself, am under the custody of CPS until next week, when I turn 21. I have a young daughter now, and I want to support her in a way that I wasn't supported. My experiences have allowed me to provide positive support to many that I come in contact with.

I have recently accepted a position as a Case Manager in a local group home. I feel strongly that my experiences have allowed me to better understand the struggles of youth in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, and offer support to them in a positive and meaningful way.

I thank you for taking time to hear my thoughts and wish you much success in the development of your task force recommendations to the President.