

'Unshakable goodness' is the core of Father Gregory Boyle's work with ex-gang members

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Published 7:52 a.m. PT Jan. 27, 2023



Father Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest and founder of Homeboy Industries in his Boyle Heights, Calif., office on Dec. 12, 2022. *Brian Blueskye/The Desert Sun*

Former gang-affiliated and incarcerated individuals take part in an 18-month rehabilitation program that includes a job and salary. Homeboy Industries also operates a diner at Los Angeles City Hall, electronics recycling, catering and a warehouse with silkscreen and embroidery manufactured for nonprofits, corporations, churches and more.

Getting into Boyle's office requires going through an assistant positioned outside his door with a list and some patience. After brief interruptions by an employee asking where to hang a framed apostolic blessing from Pope Francis, handing paychecks to employees or being notified a specific client arrived, he finished his thoughts where he left off.

Boyle said he never expected to write more books after "Tattoos on the Heart" was released in 2010 and was surprised to see his name on the festival's lineup among writers such as Jon Meacham and Rick Atkinson.

"You try to get everything in the first book because you think, 'Oh, this is it,'" Boyle said. "The first book is jam-packed with stories I've been telling for so many years. It did well and the publisher said to write another one. ("Barking to the Choir") is recycled stories from the first book. ("The Whole Language") is about theology, but it still has parables and stories."

While growing up in Los Angeles, Boyle was educated by Jesuits at Loyola High School and joined the Society of Jesus in 1972. He didn't have a calling to be a priest but was attracted to the Jesuits' "joyful and prophetic" mind frame and was ordained as a priest in 1986.

"The mark of a true disciple is joy and fearlessness. The Jesuits possess those two things and that's what I wanted," Boyle said.



Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles is one of the nation's largest trauma-focused healing sanctuaries that simultaneously operates as an employment agency. To create openings, Homeboy opened businesses of its own, including a bakery; tattoo-removal services; a silk-screening shop, and Homegirl Café & Catering – "where homegirls serve tables instead of serving time."

Referred to as "Father G" or simply "G," he comes off as non-threatening, approachable and his rapport with the "homies" is compassionate. But it's clear his kindness should never be confused for vulnerability.

"Sometimes when a homie walks in, I don't know him and he's clearly a gang member. He's furtive and looking around wondering 'am I safe?' I can make eye contact with him and smile, which lets him know I'm glad he's here," Boyle said. "If I see three guys walk in together, we call that 'deep.' When people come in deep, it's a problem. It's provocative and means they're weak, and it's dangerous to have weak people here."

In 1986, Boyle became pastor of Dolores Mission Church in Boyle Heights, which was one of the poorest Catholic parishes in Los Angeles. There were members of eight different gangs in his congregation and the area had the highest concentration of gang-related activity and violence. "I was burying kids right and left from '88 to '98 and it was horrific," Boyle said.

The idea for Homeboy Industries came in 1988 when several gang members in the local schools were expelled and wreaking havoc in the Boyle Heights area. That was when the parish started a school and some of the ex-gang members asked, "What if we had jobs?"

"We tried to find felony-friendly employers and that wasn't so forthcoming, so we started businesses," Boyle said. Homeboy Bakeries was the first, we had maintenance and landscaping crews, and a crew to build our childcare center. We had a movie producer help fund our bakery which became a flagship for order."

Clients have access to many services

The day began with clients packing into the lobby for a morning meeting. An administrator read through highlights of the schedule before turning it over to Boyle, who received a thunderous ovation. He delivered a brief lesson from the Bible on Matthew and wrapped it up by mentioning Homeboy's tattoo removal program and the clients said with him in unison the department would be doing it "all damn day."

Clients have access to services such as education, mental health, legal assistance, tattoo removal and job placement. Homeboy Industries has 148 volunteers and 100 staff members providing assistance on an annual budget of \$28 million. Over 8,000 individuals have received a helping hand from Homeboy Industries since 1988.



Homeboy Industries client and ex-gang member Welman Cornejo gives a tour of the Boyle Heights, Calif., facility to visiting students from Xavier College Preparatory High School on Dec. 12, 2022.

A group of students from Xavier College Preparatory High School in Palm Desert were also visiting with academic counselor JoJo White, who said the Catholic high school works with the nonprofit by offering student volunteers and immersing them in the neighborhood.

"Part of our saviour mission for our students is learning how to be well-rounded human beings by serving others," White said. "This is about opening their eyes to ex-gang members wanting to be treated as normal people and part of a community. That's why we bring them here and get them involved."

The students took a tour led by Welman Cornejo, a client that was 15 months into the program and told his story of coming to the United States from El Salvador during his childhood, joining a gang and serving time in prison. From the patio, he pointed to the Los Angeles County Jail a few miles away, a building he spent a lot of time in and said "every window represents a two-person cell."

Those who are previously incarcerated and former gang members are stigmatized in society, but Boyle's belief is "everybody is unshakably good and demonizing is always the opposite of truth."

"When we first started, demonizing gang members was wholesale and that's what people liked. The way people wanted to address this issue was wipe them out, lock them up, throw away the key and that's a problem," Boyle said. "It's not so much that Homeboy is the answer, but we know what the question is, and I think that's important. If it's violence you want to address, I think that's misguided because you need to address the lethal absence of hope and then watch what happens to the violence. Everything is about something else."



Trainees in the Homeboy Industries' trauma-focused job training programs in Los Angeles often ask for a blessing from Homeboy founder Father Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit priest. Trainees call him "Father G" or just Greg.

The success of Homeboy Industries has attracted delegations from other U.S. cities offering to bring the nonprofit into their communities. There are no other locations, but Boyle said the organization operates a global network of 300 others with some of the same programs and hosts an annual gathering in August to share best practices.

"There might not be a gang problem in Sydney, Australia, but there's disaffected youth. There might not be a gang problem in Glasgow, Scotland, but there's returning citizens," Boyle said. "Guatemala City likes our tattoo removal, but Glasgow doesn't need it. People come here, pick and choose and say 'Oh, we'll do that part.' It's a methodology and a community of culture, tenderness and cherishing. That's the secret sauce."

So how does a Jesuit priest relate to gang members and inspire change? He said it's about "love and healing"

"It's not about becoming a better person. It's about discovering the unshakable goodness that's always been there," Boyle said. "We don't hold a bar up, we hold up a mirror and say 'This is who you are.' That's a surprising thing for any human being to see."