

The day started with each of us standing up and saying our names into a microphone "loud and proud." A bunch of kids were really shy, but since I rap sometimes, I acted really cool when it was my turn. No one knew there was a lump in my throat. You see, I'm from a tough neighborhood, and showing your weakness only makes you a target. I was a target when I was real young, both for my brothers and for the people who called themselves my friends. We sure didn't know how to be friends, though. Fighting and putting each other down were a normal way of life.

Anyway, we started playing these games I thought were really childish. I hung back a little with my buddies, acting cool and not wanting to play like a little kid. After a couple of games, though, it didn't seem like anyone else was hanging back, and they were all having a good time. I thought, "Why not me?" I have to admit that I was playing a little rough, but it beat sitting on the edge.

What happened next was almost unbelievable. Carl, one of the only guys who is more feared and respected than me at school, was helping one of the leaders demonstrate how to give hugs. Everyone was laughing at first, but it was getting harder and harder to put anyone down that day. The leaders kept teaching us to open our hearts and minds, to share our true feelings and to give put-ups instead of put-downs. It wasn't what I was used to.

Then we did an exercise called "the power shuffle." Before the game started, the leaders talked about oppression. "Yeah," I thought, "like they really know what it's like to be oppressed. Here I am, a young Latino growing up in a white society. I get harassed and pushed around every day by store owners, teachers and all these adults who think I'm a gangster just because of the color of my skin. Yeah, I act hard, but what am I supposed to do when I have to watch my friends drop from drive-bys?"

The leaders said we had to be silent, to make it safe for everyone. They called out broad categories and asked us to cross over the line if we fit into the category. I was still snickering in my buddy's ear as the first few were called out.

But the leaders meant it about being quiet. One of the adults softly put his hand on me and said, "You'll want them to respect you; please respect them."

Category after category was called out. In silence, group after group, people crossed the line. Then a topic was called that I fit into, and I figured I would be the only one who experienced this kind of pain. "Cross the line if you've ever been hit, beaten or abused, in any way." I walked heavy in my shoes. Looking straight down as I walked, I turned around, having a hard time not laughing to cover what was going on inside me.

But as I looked up, half the group was walking with me. We stood together in silence, looked into each other's eyes, and for the first time in my life, I felt like I wasn't alone.

One by one we dropped our masks. I saw that these people, whom I had judged before, were in reality very much like me. Like me, they, too, knew how it felt to be hurt.

I walked back across the line. My friend tried to joke with me but it didn't seem right any more. Another topic was called, one where all the women and girls crossed. I had never seen before how much men and boys disrespect and hurt women. I became more uncomfortable as I noticed tears appearing in many of my friends' eyes.

We crossed the line next for having lost someone close to us in gang violence. So many of us crossed that line. It just wasn't right! I started feeling really angry inside, and tears were coming to my eyes. The leaders kept saying, "When the tears are on the outside, the inside is healing," and, "It takes a strong man to cry."