**SILVER LAKE GANG WAR**

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| Photo by Vince Valladolid |

On a recent afternoon a Latino woman and her son wearily shuffle past a makeshift shrine in front of a shabby apartment complex on the 700 block of Vendome Street. The shrine, nearly obscured by a discarded mattress and other litter, is dedicated to Valentin Rangel, a member of the Silver Lake 13 gang. He died there in a hail of bullets over Labor Day weekend, two months shy of his 26th birthday. A half-dozen Mexican religious candles, a few still burning, decorate the scene. A photo of a smiling Rangel is propped up next to them. Scattered alongside the photo are personal mementos — two skateboarding magazines, a pair of black sunglasses and a Holy Bible. “RIP Val” is spray-painted on the street in front of the memorial. Across the street, on the corner of Vendome and Marathon, a small bouquet of wildflowers and one Mexican candle mark the spot where Rangel’s brother Mario was gunned down 13 years earlier by rival gang members and where Valentin himself was shot before stumbling across the street to his apartment complex.

A deep fly ball from there, the type of urban hipsters who have earned Silver Lake its bonhomie-boho image obliviously sip café con leches at the Tropical Café and discuss Tsar’s latest show at Spaceland. The two scenes illuminate the stubborn contrast between Silver Lake’s chic main drag and the neighborhood south of Sunset Boulevard. In the streets abutting Vendome and Marathon, a spate of gang violence that started on Labor Day weekend has been responsible for several drive-bys, a car bombing, two deaths, and the rattled nerves of longtime residents and more recent arrivals who hoped the checkered neighborhood had made the transition from barrio to bourgeois.

Though gang activity has long been a part of the landscape in Silver Lake, particularly south of Sunset, residents say the recent violence, which has sent at least 40 gunshots echoing through the neighborhood, is unprecedented. On August 29, the first six shots took the life of Rangel. Another gang-related shooting — possibly tied to Rangel’s murder — only a week later and just blocks away on Bellevue left an Angelino Heights gang member injured and his friend, 28-year-old Juan Monsivais, dead. More recently, members of La Mirada gang unloaded a hail of bullets across a busy park at an SUV they believed to be carrying enemy gang members.

The level of gang violence occurring in this area, while far from the city’s worst, is happening at the same time property values have gone up 33 percent this year alone and “bargain” homes are selling for more than a half-million dollars just north of Sunset. The unexpected rash of violence here illustrates a gangs-versus-gentrification drama that’s likely to play out in other neighborhoods across the city as the overheated housing market pushes prospective new homeowners deeper into the fringes of long-held gang turf.

“I think that people thought the property values would automatically help with a problem like gangs, and I guess that’s not necessarily the case. They can still come into the neighborhood and do what they want,” said Linda Froiland, who moved here three years ago from Minnesota and who is co-president of the Silver Lake Improvement Association.

Police are unsure how or even if the recent violence is connected. Locals, though, point to a heated graffiti-tagging war between rival gangs in the area, one headed by Rangel, as the spark.

**By all accounts,**and judging from the audacious way he’d sign his name to his tags, Rangel was the main provocateur in the graffiti battle that at first presented locals with more of a nuisance than a threat when it flared up six months ago. His signature tag, “SL13Val,” sprayed on the cars, homes and businesses in streets around Vendome and Marathon became a common sight in the neighborhood. It was often scrawled over 18th Street gang graffiti. A former gang member familiar with the area says Rangel was asserting control of the area for “recruiting, to sell drugs and claim the street.”

The gang member, who asked not to be identified, believes that four gangs are currently vying for the drug trade that has been going on in the area since the 1970s, when the 18th Street gang ruled the streets. At one time, a dealer could make $800 a night selling dope on the corner of Vendome and Marathon with little threat of being arrested. Recently, the Aztlán gang had controlled the drug trafficking there, but neighborhood activists and cops worked with a local landlord this past spring to evict the last remaining active Aztlán member, who dealt out of his apartment on Vendome.

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The back-and-forth tagging showed clearly, though, that the main beef was between Rangel’s Silver Lake 13 and the 18th Street gangs. Residents and observers speculate that police efforts to clear gangs from MacArthur Park — where 18th Street had a stranglehold on the Bonnie Brae drug traffic and was known to tax street vendors — as well as a successful court injunction that made it illegal for 18th Street gang members to congregate near their former stronghold in the Pico-Union area, pushed them west in search of new turf.

“It is the supply-and-demand thing,” said Froiland. “There had been an illegal business operating here for 20 years. When we got rid of the people, it became open territory for other gangs to come in and sell drugs there.”

Rangel, apparently, didn’t put out the welcome mat.

“They [18th Street] don’t belong in this area,” said a longtime friend of Rangel’s who asked to remain anonymous. “Those guys want to take over everywhere. Before, they stuck to MacArthur Park. They have a shitty-ass town where they live. They get anyone in and they kill their own people. They want to corrupt this side of town. Nobody wants to see someone come to their house and start their own business there.”

“It is a matter of pride,” said Senior Lead Officer Al Polehonki of the LAPD’s Northeast Division. “You aren’t going to let someone from another gang spray in your area. If you are in a gang and another gang comes by, it is like a challenge to you.”

What started as a nuisance became more threatening when a Molotov cocktail was thrown into a parked SUV just after midnight in July, weeks before Rangel was gunned down. The firebomb smashed through the driver’s window of the SUV, engulfing the vehicle in flames within seconds. Residents, afraid the vehicle would explode, put out the fire long before firemen arrived on the scene about a half-hour later.

Fears that animosities were heating up in the neighborhood were confirmed on Friday, August 29, with the late-summer skies just faded to black. The streets, where young children on scooters are a common sight, were mostly bare at 8:55 p.m. except for Rangel, who was standing on the northwest corner of Vendome and Marathon when a white Toyota minivan pulled up alongside him. Two male Latinos jumped out of the car and walked toward Rangel. They started to argue, and one of the suspects, who was described as a male Latino between the ages of 18 and 25, took out a handgun and shot Rangel, who staggered down the street, before he fell less than a block from his home. The suspects then jumped back into the van and sped off, colliding with two other parked cars before leaving the scene. When Rampart patrol officers arrived, Rangel was lying on the sidewalk, dead from six gunshot wounds to the head, chest and leg. The minivan, found five blocks away, was reported stolen.

“That poor family has lost two sons,” said Froiland. “Both of whom were in gangs.”

Anti-gang officers say they became aware of Rangel after he was arrested six months earlier for tagging anarchist symbols in the area and for carrying a gun in his backpack. “He was more crazy than he was active,” said Rampart anti-gang Officer Brandon Purece. “Ever since his brother died, he kinda lost it.” At the time, the Silver Lake 13 barely registered on the cops’ radar. “They aren’t one of the most violent gangs in the area,” said Rick Ramos, detective supervisor of Rampart’s Gang Impact Team. “They have been involved in assaults and robberies. But it is sporadic. It is not a consistent problem.”

Sources say that Rangel took over the reins of the 20-plus-member Silver Lake 13 gang as the shot caller or main head sometime last year when a fellow gang member was arrested in the shooting death of a rival gangbanger on South Redondo Boulevard. When the 18th Street gang started showing up in the area, Rangel seemed to find an outlet for his angst.

“They started to ride around in the area,” says Rangel’s friend. “He [Rangel] was crossing out the tags. Unfortunately, he had to go out like that. Nobody deserves that.”

Rangel’s friend describes someone whose death was tinged with inevitability as he sank deeper into depression and violence after his girlfriend and son moved out of their one-bedroom apartment on Vendome. “Everything fell apart after his girlfriend split. He was more out of control. He was doing weed, drugs, beer. The people he was hanging out with, they were bad,” the friend said. “I didn’t want to hang out the way he wanted to hang out.”

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**What effect the neighborhood’s** rapid gentrification had on Rangel, who worked as a bicycle messenger and whose co-workers describe him as outgoing and friendly, is open to speculation. But residents say Rangel’s increasingly antisocial behavior, including allegedly threatening a woman with a screwdriver, paralleled the steep rise in local property values and the influx of new homeowners.

“He had so much anger in him,” said Sandra Ruiz, a 19-year resident and newly elected neighborhood council member. Ruiz, a mother of eight, says she keeps her kids inside most of the time, or walks them to and from friends’ and relatives’ homes. “My daughter was approached by a girl to get in a gang. I think it was Aztlán. I told her to say she has a family that loves her.”

A week after Rangel’s murder, three 18th Street gang members were arrested for burglary in Silver Lake. Residents thought that might be the end of the violence, but three weeks later, on September 23 at 6:15 p.m., a time when neighbors often walk their dogs in the famous Laurel and Hardy park, two passengers jumped out of a silver pickup truck and shot more than 15 bullets into a passing SUV as it drove past the park. The two passengers in the targeted vehicle, one a soldier who had just returned from Iraq and lived in the neighborhood, plowed into two parked vehicles, narrowly escaping injury. The shooters fled the scene. That same evening, the police arrested a member of La Mirada gang in connection with the shooting. The other three remain at large. Residents suspect the shooting is connected with the car bombing that had occurred at the same spot.

The day after the Laurel and Hardy park shooting, the Silver Lake Improvement Association held its monthly meeting at Councilman Eric Garcetti’s field office. The main topic of discussion: the escalation of the gang crime in the area. It was a relatively new topic for the neighborhood group, which was formed to fight graffiti and promote activities like the Sunset Junction Street Festival and the Silver Lake Film Festival, not contend with drive-bys. Their conclusion: more police.

“Because we are so aggressive at painting out graffiti, a lot of people didn’t realize the extent of what was going on. We do take the situation seriously. It goes back to the broken-window attitude: If you let the stuff fester, it is going to get worse,” said Rusty Millar, a longtime resident and recently elected neighborhood council member for region four, who is active in cleaning up local graffiti. “We have talked to the cops about this. People know they can get drugs there. It will only become a priority when someone politically thinks it is a priority.” ‰

Cops say help is on the way and that in reality Rampart Division’s killings are down from 150 10 years ago to 32 so far this year. Even so, that might not translate into immediate relief for Millar, Ruiz and others. LAPD’s Rampart Division is more organized today than in the days when former Officer Rafael Perez shook down local gang members. Its CRASH unit has been disbanded and renamed the Gang Impact Team, and its officers, mostly new to the division, are divvied up into three units: the special-enforcement unit, the gun-apprehension team and the gang-reality-narcotic-enforcement detail. Plus, officers, they say, are increasing patrols to tackle the 30 gangs that call the Rampart area home.

Even so, some say that, with all this reorganizing, gang intelligence has been thin and has not translated into street-wise policing, at least not here. Anti-gang officers say that it is very difficult to get to the bottom of gang killings. Relatives and neighbors fear reprisal if they talk, especially in an area like this one where Chicano, Latino and Latin American immigrants, generally distrustful of police, make up the largest ethnic group at 43 percent of the population.

Until the gang war is resolved, residents around Marathon and Vendome fear that they will be at the wrong place at the wrong time when bullets start flying. And that the violence that erupted over the Labor Day weekend is far from being over. Rangel’s friend agrees. “It is going to escalate,” he said.

Residents, though, especially relatively recent homeowners, say they will continue to improve the area. “People are investing in this area,” said Froiland. “People enjoy living here. They will do what they can to continue to make it the place they would like it to be. They are proud of what they have and what they have done.”