Community Policing Essay, Research Paper

American Me is a harsh look at the “reality” of prison and gang life, especially within the Chicano community. Based on a “true story”, American Me traces the life of a Latino crime lord, Santana, from his youth growing up in the barrio of East Los Angeles, through his rise to power behind the walls of Folso Prison. Set against a backdrop of hopelessness and prejudice the movie brutally attempts to portray the continuing cycle of violence inherent within a crime-based life-style. In the end Santana is unable to escape that cycle, dying violently at the hands of his former gang members, while at the same time such violence is given rebirth within the barrio.

Santana, played by Edward James Olmos is in prison and looking back at his life, his parent’s life, and discovering what his life has become. In the first scene of act one, the viewer is taken back in time to the 1940’s to a scene where Santana’s parents were beaten and raped by sailors in the streets of Los Angeles, simply because they were “zoot suiters.” In the mid-to-late 1950’s, where the young Santana and his buddies J.D. and Mundo are introduced. The three young boys make a pact to stay together and be a part of the long tradition gang of their barrio called “La Primera.”

First, the three boys are sentenced to time in juvenile hall for breaking and entering into a store to escape being chased down by another barrio gang. In juvenile hall they begin feeling superior to other mates when Santana kills a cellmate who rapes him in the middle of the night. Everyone in the prison is proud of Santana and his group. Because of the “respect” that he has earned, Santana and his group begin to feel that they run the show around juvenile hall. Transferred from juvenile hall into Folsom Federal Prison.

As Folsom Federal Prison is being shown on the screen, Santana’s voice is narrating the movie and he states that drugs is the new way to prove who runs the show. La Primera discovered a way to show who had the power among the prisoners: providing drugs for other inmates.

Power has consumed Santana, J.D. and Mundo’s every moment and the trio expands into an entire prison gang branch of La Primera. The tension is thickened with the formation of a second Mexican mafia in the prison called “Nuestra Familia.” This gang formed from those Mexicanos rejected by La Primera who joined together to try and take away some of La Primera’s power in the drug trafficking. Immediately, defenses went up and La Primera took action by killing off the leader of Nuestra Familia and killing one of their own men who didn?t have enough “courage” to kill Nuestra Familia?s leader when asked. When a black prisoner took more than his share of the cocaine being passed along from cell to cell, La Familia showed their power by burning him alive. They wanted everyone in the prison to know that they had the control and that nobody would go without punishment for interfering with their business.

Santana is released from prison after eighteen years. After such a long period of not having been in society he must once again learn how to live. Santana returns to his barrio to discover that some things never change; the gang continues to grow and exercise “power” outside of prison. In dealing with the crisis of being in a somewhat unfamiliar world, Santana’s personality begins to change. Seeing the repetitive cycle of the tattoo between the thumb and index finger that was imprinted on each new generation, seeing the drugs that the children were doing, seeing that their barrio would always continue with a power struggle began to wear on Santana.

Santana met Julie. Julie was beautiful, smart and wanted her family to be different from the rest of the barrio. When she met Santana and saw how he was so innocent in many ways, she fell in love with him. Santana had new hopes and desires when he met her. He saw that life could offer more than dealing drugs and killing to show power. His new view on life conflicted with his gang world still around him.

Inside, Santana fell for Julie but the first time he made love to her, it was too rough and resulted in a rifted relationship with her. Outside, his barrio was in a power struggle with other gangs. The Italians controlled the drug trafficking of East Los Angeles and La Primera wanted control. To show that La Primera was serious, the head Italian’s son, who was in Folsom Federal Prison, was raped and stabbed with a knife by the prison branch of La Primera. Meanwhile, the Black Guerrillas wanted control of La Primera’s drug dealing area and killed some of their clientele to show they were serious. In revenge, La Primera hired a group of white men to kill the Black Guerrillas. What La Primera didn?t know was that they hired the Arian Nation, a group of white supremacists. The white supremacists killed the Black Guerrillas for racial reasons, not for drug reasons and many innocent bystanders died in the attack.

The police found Santana with Julie, standing by Little Puppet’s wedding jacket (containing drugs). Santana was immediately taken back to prison without a chance to even prove that he was innocent, without a chance to ever change his life outside of prison. He wrote to Julie from prison. He read her letters and saw that she was trying to improve her life with an education. Julie wasn’t going to let the barrio hold her back and Santana felt the same about his own life. He knew that he had to get out of the barrio. The final scene of the movie was the obligatory act. La Primera had noticed his weakening desire for power. When they came by his cell one day and asked if he was coming out, he answered “yes,” knowing his fate. They stabbed him to death immediately. No one could be in La Primera if they showed signs of weakening. Santana knew that there was more to life that the one he had led. To show his real power meant standing up for what he knew was right. He stood up to end the continuous cycle of killings and drug dealing.. It took dying to prove his point. It took dying to prove Santana’s real power.

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