

Homelessness spurs Hanford man to tell forgotten stories on video blog

By Andrea Castillo



Leo Gonzalez interviews Marisa Carvalho for his video blog, "The Life Project."

ANDREA CASTILLO — THE FRESNO BEE

HANFORD — Leo Gonzalez knows what it's like to not have a place of his own.

The 20-year-old, homeless on and off for most of his life in Hanford, has slept in his mother's car, on a borrowed couch and in a shared room.

But at age 16, he walked by a homeless community in Santa Cruz and was stunned by what he saw: Raw homelessness. People playing music on plastic bins, a one-legged man in a wheelchair with old food next to him, a woman lying on the sidewalk.

It was a scene many big-city residents see frequently, but it was one that propelled Gonzalez to act. Gonzalez said that was the point when he realized people are hardened to homelessness, unfazed by those who sleep on the street.

"At some point, people around them stopped caring," he said. "We're so used to this that we don't care that they are here."

Armed with a point-and-shoot digital camera, Gonzalez set out to make connections. He was interested in telling the stories of people overlooked. More than three years later, Gonzalez uses his YouTube video blog, "[The Life Project](#)," to share them.

Gonzalez started out asking homeless people one question: Why are we alive? It was a question he often asked himself when he felt depressed. Later, he shifted focus to make the blog a celebration of life, talking to people in various situations.

'What's stopping me?'

Gonzalez adds a new video almost every week. The videos are raw, sometimes shaky and usually accompanied by background music. Gonzalez is a novice, self-taught in shooting and editing video on Windows Movie Maker. He works at a movie theater and a sub sandwich shop in Hanford.

Still, the blog resonates with some local young people adept at social media. Some stories even come to him.

That's how he met Marisa Carvalho, a 20-year-old Hanford resident who recently found The Life Project on Instagram and decided to share her story.

Carvalho said she was inspired by Gonzalez's video of a woman named Jenny who talked about her struggles with depression and self-worth. Like Jenny, Carvalho has grappled with depression since her friend died of cancer just before they entered high school. She was also bullied in high school.

Jenny's video gave her hope.

"It was very moving to me," Carvalho said. "I thought, if she can sit down in front of a camera and tell her story, what's stopping me?"

The Life Project YouTube page has stories of sorrow, tragedy, regret and hope. It has a few public safety announcements about suicide prevention and a few coming-out stories.

Sharing other people's stories eventually gave Gonzalez the courage to tell his own. In the black-and-white video last October, he looks straight at the camera and tells viewers he is gay.

"This has frankly been a horrible feeling that I've tried to run away from for years because the church is all I've ever known and have loved being part of," he says in the video. "I've been suicidal, nervous and scared for my life because of it."

Accepting the messiness

Gonzalez moved to Eureka after high school when he got a job working with youth and Spanish-speakers through an evangelical church. He also edited commercials part time at the local CBS station.

His move was a way to leave Hanford and continue The Life Project, which the church supported. But the church did not support gay people.

"At some point, I was actually like, 'I'm going to kill myself if I stay here because my boss hates who I am without even knowing that it's me,'" he said. "I knew that I had to leave, but it was hard because it was like the first time I had a home. And my home came with the job."

Gonzalez moved back to Hanford last October to live with his mother.

In January, a homeless man stole his camera, tripod and audio equipment worth \$900 as he filmed a homeless woman in San Francisco. He now films on a GoPro and uses his iPhone for audio. In March he closed down his website, unable to continue paying for the domain.

Gonzalez dreams of a career telling stories. Through The Life Project, he tries to get strangers to take off their mask, or, as he puts it, show their humanity in its rawest form.

In a video posted last August, Gonzalez explains the reasoning behind his desire to tell people's stories.

"The most beautiful thing is that I know I'm a mess and I know that the people around me are a mess," he says. "But I think life would be so much different if we completely came to terms with the messiness, with exactly what we are,

and lived in a way that accepted ourselves and accepted the people around us.”

Contact Andrea Castillo: acastillo@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6279 or [@andreamcastillo](https://twitter.com/andreamcastillo) on Twitter.