

INTERVIEW WITH ROMAN

by Deputy Nancy Henrickson

Roman claims he is number three man in the Deuce Mob Crips. In the past year he has attempted to extricate himself from the gang. Loco Ben, the Big Man, with help from the Grooser, the number two man (Roman says, Uh, he's kinda like a vice-president), staged Roman's near-fatal stabbing two months ago, just as a gentle reminder that these Mafia-like affiliations are meant to last a lifetime.

Being the third man in the Crips gang, Roman proudly tells me that he is in charge of recruiting gangsters from the age of fourteen to age seventeen. He conducts all the initiations, informal ceremonies that feature as their central activity hitting, punching or "jagging" the new member. Jagging means taking a keenly sharp knife and slicing the upper arm of a new dude, just enough to hurt, just enough to leave a not too noticeable scar for those who know what it means. Roman says See, that's my little slash right there on my arm, kinda like a tattoo.

I ask Roman how he became a member of the Crips. Roman talks about when he was in the military, actually in the Army's Airborne Rangers, for two years. After being discharged, Roman went to Oakland where a guy from Los Angeles introduced him to cocaine, to other friends, and to what these other friends could do to take care of him. As he tells it, he just kept meeting more and more people, some called Crips and some called Bloods and some in Mexican gangs, and they started telling him about what's happenin'. Being a fresh nineteen year old, Roman is curious and latches onto a twenty-two year old veteran of street crime named Ben. Ben and others teach him how to hang out, how to fight, give him a roscoe and they go around

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shooting, and stuff like that. Another gangster, Derrick, notices that Roman can handle himself pretty well — what Roman attributes to some of that military training finally being useful.

Roman is then told by Ben and Derrick that they need his "talents" and that he will be allowed to join their club. Roman gets initiated by the other members kicking his ass around for a while — not too long — just enough to let Roman know he's on the bottom of the heap. Roman describes an average initiation: when one person's getting "dogged," then all the others join in the punching, kicking and slapping. Roman says Yeah, they whupped me pretty good. Then we all got in cars and went gang-bangin'. This means getting guns and doing some drive-by shootings.

There is an art to gang-banging. Roman gets a little gangster, sometimes as young

as thirteen, beats him up a little to scare him or turns him out with some drugs. This kid finds out where the slob lives who will soon be the target of their retaliation, finds out what he does, when he will be home, where he goes. The kid acts as a lookout, a guard. Then the rest of the gang drives by and shoots up the house, car, other family members, whatever is in the line of fire.

Where does Roman find these kids? He goes straight to the junior high schools and elementary schools and recruits them on the school yard. Roman brags, I just give them candy or dope, tell them they're bad, and they kinda like that. They get other little friends who get more little friends and this is Roman's very effective recruiting process. Roman thinks the youngest member of the gang now is twelve, but they have had some as young as eight a few years back.

Roman pulls up his sweatshirt and shows me a six-inch scar on his belly. That's where Loco Ben and number two man Crazy Joe stabbed him several months ago. Roman loudly complains Hey! I wanted out because I got too involved in smoking crack and I got real tired of sharin' my woman with the other members. I didn't want all the other guys messin' around with her, and she didn't like it either. So Roman told Loco Ben it was time to be getting out of the gang. Loco Ben didn't agree, and he and Crazy Joe stabbed Roman just enough to keep him in the hospital for about a week, but not so bad that it cut up anything important inside. Roman is still number three man. He's still sharing his girlfriend too.

Roman shows me how to hide dope in the door. He laughs at cops who always look in the same places when they raid

crack houses. He says they don't look up — sometimes the crack is hidden in air conditioning vents and false ceilings. But it's real easy to hide a large amount in a rearranged door, preferably a bathroom door. Roman says You gotta take this piece off — see this piece right here? — and replace it with another piece after you stuff the dope down into it. Rearranging doors looks to me like a very laborious process.

Roman tells me with some bravado that his gang's main function is to sell rock cocaine. It started up here because gangs came from Los Angeles and found the whole area wide open. Crack prices had dropped in L.A. but here they could charge anything and make big money. He says that was in 1984. Bosses in L.A. noticed how quickly large amounts of crack were selling for large amounts of money, and then they moved in fast.

Roman says people are hip to crack in just about every little city in California.

Roman ran into trouble again a couple of weeks ago because of his woman. This was his special lady and he wanted to keep her that way. Other gang members didn't agree and went over to her house one night. Roman arrived just as the sixth one was finishing up. Roman decided he'd had it with all the gang business, was tired of doing all these crazy things, and announced to everyone he wanted out. They said Uh-uh — you in the gang and ain't never gonna get out. So far they're right.

The Grooser, otherwise known as Crazy Joe and the vice-president of the organization, is in charge of handing out ammunition and weapons. He transports the crack to Sacramento and collects the more than \$1,000 per day he makes on each of his rock houses. He also answers

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most of the beeper calls for more dope. Roman chuckles about him supplying the workers at the rock houses with as much crack as they need to keep their habits going. The Grooser never has problems getting people to work the crack houses.

Roman thinks the worst thing about all these gangs is the killing. Roman hums a soft Oooooee — all the beatings and, um, gang bangin' — you know — drive-bys! He shakes his head, puckers his lips and says in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, Don't like to use kids younger than twelve for the look-outs 'cause they get pretty hyped up and do weird things, 'specially if they hubba heads. So I ask him, Roman, have you killed anyone? Roman doesn't say anything. He just stares at me with an expectant, or maybe a startled expression, as if I'm not

supposed to ask that particular question. But his eyes give me the answer. ★

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