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A gang's staying power

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Robert Gauthier / Los Angeles Times

GRIEF: Family, friends and Glassell Park neighbors gather Friday to grieve for Daniel Ivan Leon, who was killed Thursday on Drew Street in a shootout with police.

Entrenched for years in Northeast L.A., the Avenues continues to defy the forces of law and gentrification.

By Joe Mozingo, Sam Quinones and Richard Winton, Los Angeles Times Staff Writers
February 23, 2008

The young men who rule Drew Street have survived countless convictions, injunctions, evictions and deportations.

Over the years, they have called themselves the Cypress Assassins, the Pee Wee Gangsters, the Brown Crowd Youngsters. They are as much clan as gang, deeply interconnected by family, with decades in their Glassell Park neighborhood.



PHOTO GALLERY
Glassell Park Shooting

Police have tried to crush them for years, but for all the law enforcement rained upon the shabby two blocks of wrought-iron fences and stucco apartments, homeboys still command the street, as evidenced by the wild shootout Thursday in Northeast Los Angeles. The gun battle, which followed a drive-by attack near an elementary school, prompted police to shut down dozens of blocks, stranded thousands of residents and left two people dead.



PHOTO GALLERY
After the shootout

The Drew Street crew is just one clique of the notorious Avenues gang that has tenaciously retained control over a wide swath of Northeast L.A., defying both the forces of gentrification and heavy crackdowns by police and federal agents.

The gang, deriving its name from the avenues that cross Figueroa Street, took root in the 1950s and has wreaked havoc ever since. The insignia tattooed on many members' bodies speaks to their virulent history: a skull with a bullet hole, wearing a fedora.

The city attorney hit the Avenues with a gang injunction

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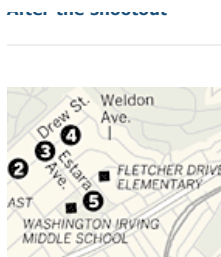
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GRAPHIC
Shootout in Northeast L.A.
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Sources: ESRI, TeleAtlas, LAPD
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in 2002, making it illegal for known members to congregate or ride in cars together throughout much of Highland Park, Glassell Park, Cypress Park and Eagle Rock.

And in 2006, the U.S. attorney in Los Angeles won hate-crime convictions against five members for a murderous campaign to force African Americans out of their turf.

But even though the Avenues' presence in many neighborhoods has diminished in recent years -- currently, there are about 400 members -- it remains one of the most powerful gangs in the city. And it retains strong ties to the Mexican Mafia, known as the Eme -- a dominant force in California prisons.

"They are fully entrenched in the northeast community," said U.S. Atty. Thomas P. O'Brien, who led the hate-crime case and prosecuted members of the gang earlier in his career, as a deputy district attorney. "This is one of those older street gangs that are generational. You have youngsters who are 10 or 11 years old jumped in to the same gang claimed by their grandfathers."

The Drew Street clique is run by five interrelated families, police say. The layout of the small neighborhood -- cut off by San Fernando Road, backed up against Forest Lawn Memorial Park -- serves as a perfect redoubt.

The area has long been a source of income for the Mexican Mafia, as Avenues members have taxed local drug dealers and paid a cut to the prison gang, according to Tony Raphael, author of "The Mexican Mafia." A prominent member of the Eme, Javier "Gangster" Marquez, grew up on Drew Street, and drugs from Mexico would land there before being distributed. Raphael said a recent uptick in violence stems from a renewed push by the Avenues to collect taxes from smaller gangs in Cypress Park and Glassell Park.

Police said the Thursday shootout began when gang members opened fire on 36-year-old Marcos Salas near Aragon Elementary School as he held the hand of his 2-year-old granddaughter. The girl was whisked away, but Salas later died. As the gunmen drove off, several people

who apparently knew the victim started firing at them.

Minutes later, police converged on Drew Street, 10 blocks away. They pulled over a white Nissan sedan, and three men jumped out and opened fire, police said. The officers fired back, wounding one man and hitting another, who was wielding an AK-47.

Daniel Leon, 22 -- a heavy in the Drew Street crew -- died on the asphalt he and his brothers ruled. The wounded man, Jose Angel Gomez, was taken to a hospital and is being held on suspicion of killing Salas. Another gunman, Guillermo Ocampo, was later caught by police and booked for investigation of murder. Police identified all three as members of the Avenues.

Leon was one of 13 children of Maria Leon, who lived at 3304 Drew St. until the city shut down the home last year with a narcotics abatement lawsuit. City Atty. Rocky Delgadillo called the home the gang's "mother ship." More than 40 arrests were made there in 2006, and the city attorney was attempting to ban Daniel Leon from the neighborhood before he was killed.

His family is one of the five that control drug sales in the area, LAPD Deputy Chief Sergio Diaz and other sources said.

"This clique is bound by close family ties," said Diaz. "It goes back generations."

Like hundreds of residents in the neighborhood, the Leons originally hailed from the village of Tlalchapa, in Guerrero, Mexico, neighbors said.

That shared history breeds loyalty. Several residents interviewed Friday said they supported the Avenues. "I've been here 25 years and they've never disrespected me," said Modesta Hernandez. "On the contrary, they protect us. They help us."

They depicted the police as hostile and corrupt, and several said the shooting of Daniel Leon was unprovoked, although one neighbor said he clearly saw Leon raise the assault weapon at the officers.



Leon had a history of violence. He was arrested for killing a drug buyer at the house in 2004 and was ultimately convicted of being an accessory to murder. In 2005, he was arrested in a case in which prosecutors alleged "he brutally beat and robbed a 43-year-old man . . . as his wife looked on." The wife would not speak to prosecutors out of fear of retaliation.

This fear is the continuing obstacle in authorities' attempts to break the gang's grip. Witnesses don't believe police will protect them. And gang members who flip on their brethren are instantly "green-lighted" -- marked for execution.

David "Mouseie" Cruz testified in 2001 against an Avenues member who was accused of taking part in the killings of two black men. Cruz was then deported to El Salvador, where he was stabbed 22 times in retaliation, but he survived.

FBI Special Agent Jerry Fradella recalled trying to pressure the least culpable defendant in the hate-crime case to testify against his codefendants in exchange for leniency. Fernando "Sneaky" Cazares was known to have been inside a van listening to a police scanner while other defendants carried out a killing outside. But he wouldn't betray them.

"He was loyal to the end," Fradella said. "And he got triple life just like the other guys."

Compounding the problem, potential informants often cannot envision a life after snitching -- no longer safe in their neighborhoods, which are often all they know of the world. And in prison, they would have to be held in protective custody.

"They're just so unfamiliar with whatever else is out there, they want to stick to what they know," Fradella said.

The silence is unbearable for the victims' families. Luisa Prudhomme's son Anthony was shot twice in the head as he lay in bed in his apartment in Highland Park on Nov. 3, 2000. He had no gang affiliation and worked at a Pier 1.

His slaying was part of the hate-crime case that led to the conviction of the five men. But the actual shooter is still at large. Police believe they know his identity, but no one will talk.

"I want the person who murdered my son to be brought to justice," Prudhomme said. "The guy who pulled the trigger. He used a pillow, but he must have gotten some of my son's blood on him. He knows what he did. God knows what he did."

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