

A man with extensive tattoos on his arms and forehead is the central focus, wearing a white t-shirt and shouting with his arms raised in a crowd of other men. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting an indoor setting at night or in a dark room. The man's expression is one of intense emotion, and his mouth is wide open as if he is shouting or chanting. The crowd around him consists of other men, some looking towards the camera and others looking away, all appearing to be part of the same event or gathering. The overall atmosphere is one of high energy and collective action.

# IN THE LAND OF LAMBS & WOLVES

*FROM EL SALVADOR'S GANGS, AN UNLIKELY PROPHET RISES*

# LOGLINE

In the cradle of two of the world's most violent gangs - MS13 and Barrio 18 - a small church in El Salvador comprised of former gang members is leading a movement to disarm and deactivate the criminal networks. But can society trust a peace movement led by the very perpetrators responsible for the violence?





# BACKGROUND



No other nation in the Western hemisphere has been ravaged by the beasts of war as El Salvador - a country of barely 6.4 million people. Crippled by a 12-year civil war that claimed the lives of 75,000 of its citizens, celebrations of an “achieved” peace by the US-backed military right and left-wing guerrilla fighters were short-lived and promptly overshadowed by the start of the country’s new war: gangs.

El Salvador and the United States have a lengthy and complex history together. At the height of the civil war, tens of thousand of Salvadoran refugees poured into cities across the United States and populated the projects and “hoods.” Consequently, disenfranchised Central American youth were harassed and persecuted by existing gangs in LA, which prompted them to unite and establish two of today’s most notorious streets gangs - MS13 and 18 Street. As war broke out in the streets of LA, President Bill Clinton ordered the mass deportation of Central American felons, many who were gang members, which marked the birth of gangs in the region.



Central American gangs are squarely a U.S. export. El Salvador in the early 90s, fresh from a brutal civil war, was fertile ground for the rapid proliferation of MS-13 and Barrio 18 throughout the region. Deportees, many whom had lived their whole lives in the U.S., were returned to a broken country with little to no opportunity. Predictably, they resorted to all they ever knew - violence and extortion. The complex nature of root causes of migration are often oversimplified by traditional news reporting. In this film, our protagonists and supporting characters will take us on a journey that began in the streets of LA to the epicenter of gang violence - El Salvador.

Today, the U.S.' role in the ongoing The American government funds the very police that represses and is responsible for countless human rights violations in the region. Poverty continues to rise, and corruption impedes any true efforts of progress. The active gang and the police are in an all-out war. Caught in the middle are millions of innocent people, and this distinct group of former gang members determined to defy the active gang and call for its disarmament. However, can Salvadoran society fully forgive a group of people that once terrorized their communities? Can God truly transform the hearts and lives of hardened criminals? All these questions will be reflected in the film, allowing viewers to form an opinion on their own.

A photograph of two men in a crowd. The man on the left is wearing a dark blue suit and tie, has extensive tattoos on his face and hand, and is looking at an open book. The man on the right is wearing a light green shirt and glasses, and is also looking at an open book. The background is a blurred crowd of people.

# CHARACTERS

## Willfredo "Will" Gomez

Will Gomez fled to the U.S. at the height of the Salvadoran civil war. A product of LA's South Central - cradle to the city's most violent gangs - Will was exposed to the brutality of street life as a pre-teen. At 13, Will ran away from his house and opted for a life of drug-dealing and was jumped into the 18 Street gang. Now a pledged gang member, Will was allured by the fast money, easy access to drugs, and - most importantly - newfound respect. For nearly two decades, Will Gomez ran the streets of LA and the prisons of California, quickly raising the ranks of Barrio 18 to become a respected leader within the criminal network. But his fate abruptly changed once he was deported back to El Salvador. Upon arrival, with no family and barely any fluency of Spanish, Will sought the gang's protection in a homeland he knew nothing of. Within three months, he was arrested for illegal possession of a firearm and given a 10-year prison sentence.

Inside prison, Will had a close brush of death due to a severe case of tuberculosis - at that moment he found God. Will made a deal with God and pledged to leave the gang to work toward the disarmament of the gang if his life would be spared. At La Gotera prison, Will - along with a handful of prisoners - founded their own ministry. Today, of Gotera's estimated 1200 prisoners, more than 1000 have renounced the gang and opted for a life of Christianity. Labeled as "The Miracle of Gotera," Christian prisoners are so well behaved, that authorities have now started integrating former MS-13 members into this exclusively 18 Street prison, an unprecedented action that points to the effectiveness of this movement. Furthermore, the mass exodus from the gang has gained Will Gomez many enemies, especially from within the very gang he once led.





## **Willfredo “Will” Gomez (contd)**

There’s a saying in El Salvador: “Don’t mess with God and the gang.” The only way gang leaders allow members to “leave” is if they pledge to follow the “road of God” - meaning strict adherence to an evangelical lifestyle. Members that pledge to convert to Christianity are closely monitored by the active gang and swiftly punished if suspected of engaging in “ungodly” activities. The pressures of this conditional freedom granted by the gang are exasperated by government forces that distrust former gang members, and a fearful society reluctant to forgive them. In the eye of the storm stand Will Gomez and the pastor of San Salvador’s Eben Ezer Church, Pastor Nelson Moz.

Located in one of San Salvador’s most dangerous, gang-controlled neighborhoods, the Eben Ezer Church is revamping a social experiment tried - and failed - by past efforts: to welcome, house and rehabilitate former gang members that have converted to evangelical Christianity. Week after week, former 18 Street gang members check themselves into the humble facilitates in hopes for a new life. Ex-gang members fight multiple battles in their efforts to re-integrate: they have criminal records which often make them unemployable, their gang tattoos greatly restrict their freedom of movement, state forces often target them due to their perceived vulnerability, and many have been left without family and a home. The only thing that is constant for former gang members is the support and help of their past comrades that have remained in the active gang. This is the process that Will Gomez and Pastor Moz are working to disrupt.

## ***Willfredo “Will” Gomez (contd)***

Since his release in January 2017, Will Gomez has faced the very challenges many members of his ministry encounter: unemployment, homelessness, harassment from the police, persecution from MS-13, and the temptation to fall back into his position of power as one of the leaders of 18 Street. This film follows Will Gomez’s journey as he becomes the leader of the evangelical Christian movement that is persuading gang members to disarm and abandon the life of crime. However, despite living in El Salvador for more than decade, the US-deportee still feels like a foreigner in his native land. His immediate family resides in Los Angeles and hasn’t seen Will since he was deported, a reunion we hope to capture with the film. In LA, he left a son, now 21, who is yet to forgive his father’s past transgressions. Furthermore, Will recently learned that his son was openly gay; a moral conundrum that deeply troubles him. Meanwhile in El Salvador, his wife Yesenia is due to welcome a baby girl in April, while Will recently lost his job at a call center, bringing added pressure to the family. Will constantly walks the delicate line of being the liaison between ex-gang members and the active gang, which makes him vulnerable to attacks from the police and the gang itself. Will’s defiance is unprecedented, even going as far as starting the process to remove his gang tattoos, an act that is often punished by death.





## ***Pastor Nelson Moz***

Nelson Moz, a soft-spoken pastor who's led the Eben Ezer ministry for over 30 years, has no criminal past nor connection to the gang. Upon meeting Will Gomez, he opened the doors of his church to allow Will and a handful of other newly released prisoners to live and start a small bakery to support themselves. While the church provides shelter and its minimal bakery earnings, this refuge has become a target for police who is apprehensive of the true intentions of Eben Ezer's residents. In 2018 alone, the church had over a dozen illegal police break-ins, and a number of its members arrested on suspicion of ongoing gang activity, though no cases have resulted in convictions. With no protection from the government, limited resources, and constant pressures from the active gang, the future of Pastor Moz and members of his church is more at jeopardy than ever. Pastor Moz is slowly stepping into the public light as the face of reintegration and rehabilitation of former gang members, which has subjected Pastor Moz to rampant character assassination by the media and members of his community. However, Moz's message is reaching international audiences, as he is summed by churches around the world to speak on the Christian phenomenon overtaking El Salvador's gangs. With mounting pressures and newfound popularity, Pastor Moz must decide if he can continue this project given the ongoing threats to his life and never-ending harassment by police.

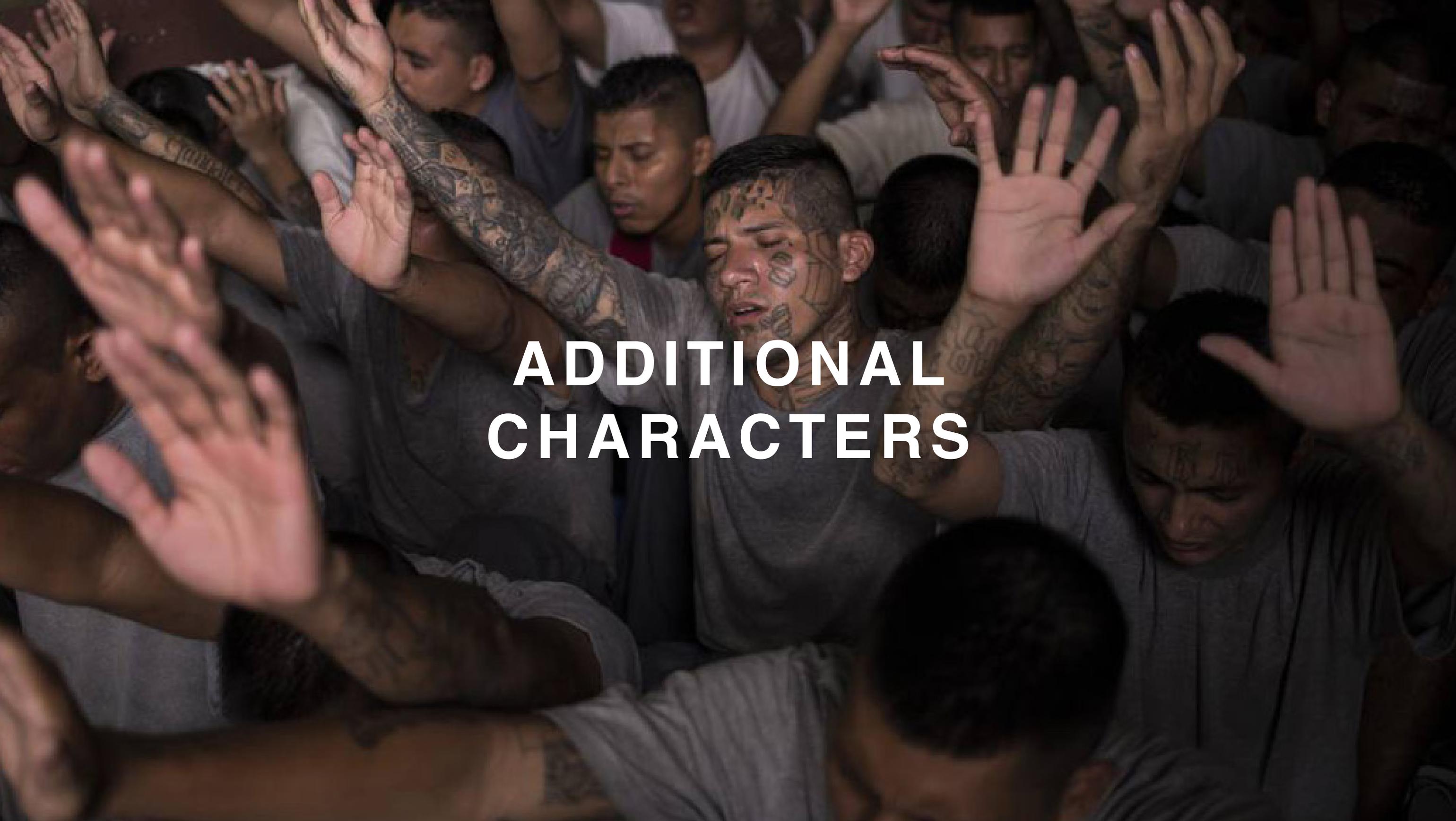
## ***Juan Martinez D'aubuisson***

Juan Martinez D'Aubuisson is one of Central America's most knowledgeable and respected gang experts and authors. He has published a series of articles and books which detail with unparalleled depth and access the workings of MS-13 and 18th Street in El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico.

Juan's latest venture is to research and document the Evangelical Christianity phenomenon overtaking the gangs. A frequent visitor of Eben Ezer's church, Juan's character is the thread between the worlds of active and retired gang members, as he dissects the veracity and sustainability of this Christian movement. Furthermore, Juan's character exposes the dire social and economic conditions that give birth to gang activity, and the government's brutal and arguably effective response to combat the never-ending violence.

Juan's vocal criticism of El Salvador's corrupt and "hypocritical" government has gained him many enemies, and the combative nature of the incoming president-elect, Nayib Bukele, is sure to bring further scrutiny to Juan's message. However, in a country where the government and the gang often stifle freedom of speech, Juan's candidness about the tragedy of El Salvador's is unprecedented and needed.



A group of men, likely in a prison setting, are shown with their hands raised in prayer. The men are wearing grey t-shirts and have various tattoos on their arms and faces. The central figure has prominent tattoos on his face and neck. The background is dark, and the overall atmosphere is somber and reflective.

# ADDITIONAL CHARACTERS



**Ricardo**



**Alirio**



Eben Ezer's church houses nearly 20 former gang members, with additional dozens that attend the ministry's events or work in the bakery. Often, former residents of the church branch off to start their own ministries in neighborhoods inaccessible even by police.

Two of those stories are that of Alirio Hernandez and Ricardo Arevalo. Both of these heavily tattooed former gang members held positions of power within the gang and - due to their appearance - have absolutely no chance to reintegrate and be accepted by society. Therefore, becoming evangelical preachers is their only option for survival and acceptance. Yet, the temptation of returning to the one place they really belong, the active gang, is constantly present.



**CREATIVE VISION**

The visual power of this film isn't solely on the shock value of heavily tattooed gang members or bloody murder scenes - a traditional aesthetic films on El Salvador tend to adopt. The power of the visuals lie in the contrasts that are exposed through the intense emotions of remorse, forgiveness, and redemption that result from this new Christian life.

The intimacy of the characters' interactions with their loved ones offers an unprecedented look into the everyday lives of these former gang members, as they re-enter the lives of their families and work to rebuild the relationships destroyed after years of running and imprisonment. Many of these "daily life" scenes will be shot in verite style. In this story of new beginnings, we see these former gang members tackle with unemployment, mistrust from their families and the communities they live in, and other obstacles that arise for this segment that is so feared and rejected by society.





There is room for creativity in this film given the elements of religion and mysticism present throughout. In interviews, many of these former gang members speak on pacts they've made with the devil during their time in the gang. They also speak in detail of "demons" visiting them in their dreams and demanding they return to the gang. Lastly, God and many elements of the Bible are frequently referenced throughout the film.

With an appropriate Production Designer, we can bring to life the elements of mysticism and darkness that are prevalent in this film, particularly during the interviews where the characters discuss in the detail the atrocities they committed during their time in the gang, and the dreams that haunt them.

I'm very inspired by the look and visual aesthetic of the music video "Peau de Chagrin" by Congolese artist Baloji.

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**BACKROADS**

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PICTURES