

# Homegirl Café

—Serving Up Hope

Here, the homegirls have traded in a life of serving time for serving their community.

BY Jessica Lopez; PHOTOS BY Edgar Hoill

It's estimated that there are more than one million women incarcerated in the United States today. Upon being released, only four in 10 of those women are able to find employment in the regular labor market, leaving many with no choice but to continue living the *vida loca*. But Homegirl Café, in Los Angeles, California, is doing something to change that.

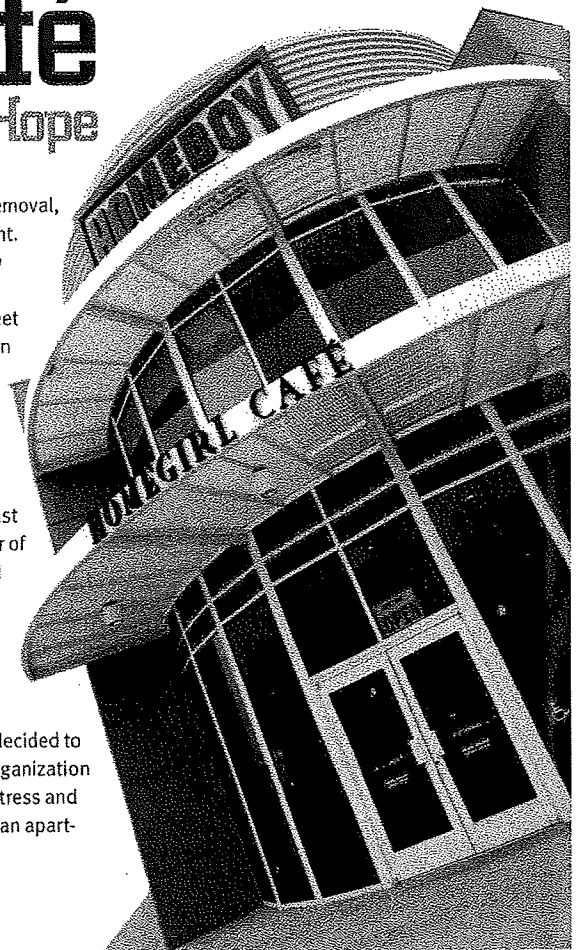
"The girls who are working here are recently released from prison or are recently coming out of a gang," explains Café manager Shannon Smith, sporting an apron with the company's mission: Jobs Not Jails. "They just can't find a job any other place."

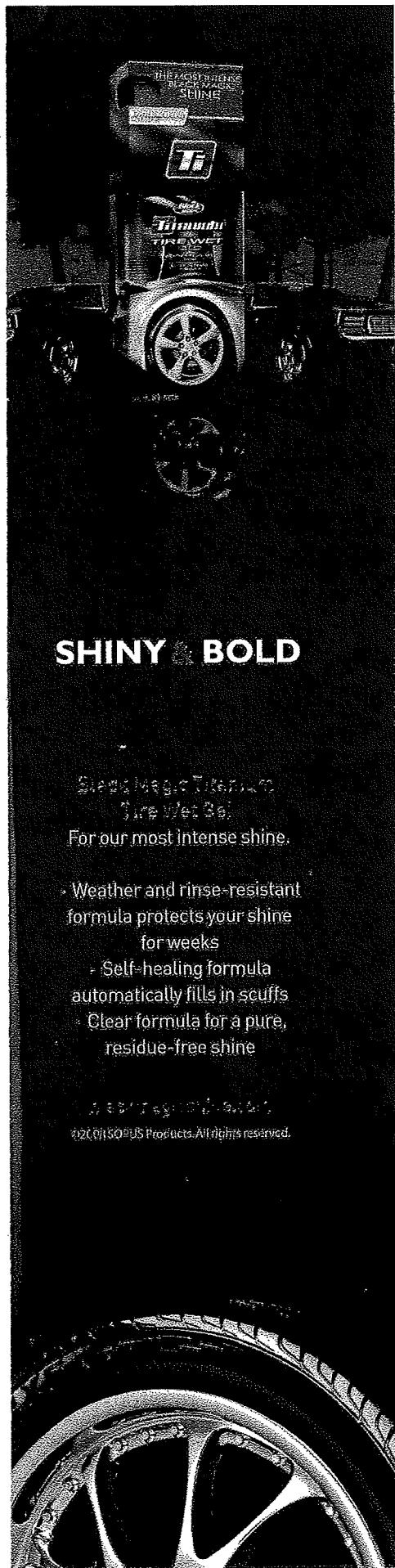
The Café is part of Homeboy Industries, a non-profit organization founded by Jesuit father Greg Boyle that helps former gang members and parolees become contributing members of society. They offer such services

as counseling, education, tattoo removal, job development and job placement.

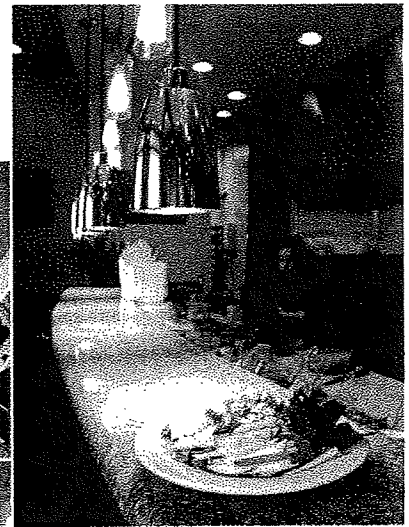
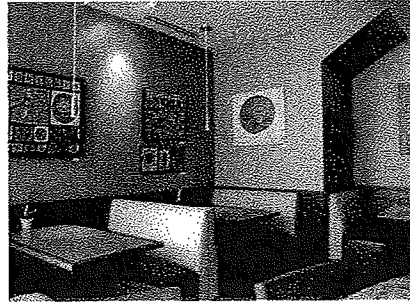
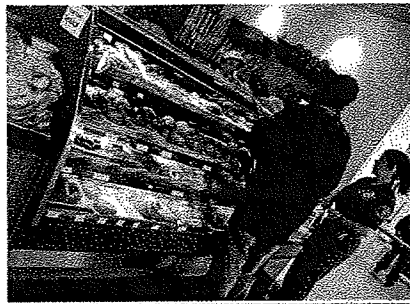
"The program has changed my life tremendously," says Jennifer, a 20-something homegirl with a sweet smile and shy demeanor. "I've been in and out of prison since I was a kid... the Y.A., juvenile hall. I'm learning that I can be productive in society and that I don't have to gang bang and hustle anymore."

Jennifer (who asked that her last name not be printed) is the mother of five young children, and she heard about the program while serving a two-year sentence in prison for selling drugs and "living the life." Three weeks after being released, Jennifer, who had been searching for employment but had no luck, decided to hit up Homeboy Industries. The organization gave her a job at the Café as a waitress and cashier, and even helped her find an apart-





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ment. Today, she attends classes to get her high school diploma and plans to someday open up a sober living home.

Jennifer is just one of the many women who come to Homegirl Café in hopes of changing their lives. Lives once filled with stories of self-destructive behavior and despair. "They come with an assortment of issues," says Smith, who further explained that the girls are required to attend classes to help them deal with problems such as substance abuse and domestic violence.

Currently, the Café employs some 30 females, most of whom are former gang members, which brought up the issue of rivalry in the work place. "There are arguments," admits Smith. "But it happens in a safe environment and that makes all the difference in the world. They just get over it and get back to work."

Getting over it is something that Dorene Macias, 40, is learning to do. "I face challenges on a daily basis being here," relates Macias, a bright-eyed and well-spoken *Latina* who once rolled with one of L.A.'s most notorious and violent gangs. "Dealing with the characters, the personalities, the differences that we all have... sometimes that old habit of mine just wants to react, but I've learned to recognize those feelings and I just go and pray, because without God, I couldn't have come this far."

Macias first visited Homeboy Industries in early 2000 to get some tattoos removed; inked-in memories of a life she wanted to erase, but will never forget. She spent 10 years behind bars for crimes ranging from gang affiliation to drug trafficking and extortion. Macias says that upon being released from jail she

entered an occupational program and received her LVN license. She even graduated first in her class, but when her fingerprint records came back, Sacramento took her license away.

But that didn't discourage Macias. She held her head up high and kept looking forward. And though she managed to land a string of successful jobs on her own, she eventually made her way to Homegirl Café, where she is the morning prep chef. "Being here has opened a lot of doors for me," mentions Macias, who also mentors at-risk youth. "Being here allows me to be involved in many of the programs and I can pursue my education."

Macias is a psychology student at Los Angeles City College. She's on the Dean's List. "I'm studying to get my AA right now," she relates. "Then I'll go for my Bachelor's, and who knows, maybe I'll get my Doctorate degree one day."

"There are a lot of success stories here," reports Smith. "Father Greg wants everyone who works here to realize that they are special and that they are important regardless of their past. They have something to contribute to this world and society."

Needless to say, the homegirls at the Café have traded in a life of serving time in prison for serving their community and serving some of the best Mexican food that L.A. has to offer. The menu, planned by head chef Patricia Zarate, offers everything from healthier-style Mexican dishes like tofu-potato tacos to more traditional dishes like chorizo and eggs. For more information on Homegirl Café/Homeboy Industries please check them out at [www.homeboy-industries.org](http://www.homeboy-industries.org). 