

"THE ROLE OF EL PINTO VIEJO"

By: Victor A. Aguirre

LYNAUGH UNIT

A few years ago I read an article about elephants in a wildlife reserve. Poachers had been killing older elephants for sport and for their tusks. They killed so many elephants that, for a time, the only ones left were the younger ones. Park rangers started noticing something that bothered them: without elders, the young male elephants had become uncontrolled, brutal, vicious and savage. They began fighting amongst each other, ramming into trees and other objects for no apparent reason, and killing other animals indiscriminately. The rangers did not know what to make of this development and were at a loss for a solution. Finally, someone came up with an idea. They decided to bring in some older elephants from other parts of the country to the reserve.

Only days after bringing them in, the rangers noticed the big difference the older elephants had made on the younger ones. Every time a young elephant did something that was out of control, the older ones would stomp their feet and shout their disapproval. The older elephants not only stomped and shouted, they would also lead the younger ones by example, with their calm and serene demeanor. Little by little the young ones began to understand what was acceptable behavior and what was not. The reserve returned to being peaceful again.

This story illustrates the importance of elders in any type of environment. In the Darby section of The Echo newspaper, guys are always debating the definition of being a "convict", or, as we say in Spanish slang, a "pinto viejo." I think this elephant illustration gives a perfect definition of what being a "pinto viejo" really is. I believe it is the responsibility of all "old schools", "O.G.s", "pintos viejos" here in the prison system to set an example for the younger and wilder elephants.

The example I am talking about here is not only about showing the younger ones how to do time or how to follow the unwritten rules of prison life. That's only part of it. The main things we should be teaching them are these: how to respect others (Benito Juarez, the first full-blooded native to become President of Mexico famously said, "El respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz." - "To respect other people's rights is peace."); how to use their time wisely by doing things that will benefit them and better them as people; and how to deal with problems with equanimity and patience instead of with anger and violence. In other words, teaching them how to be decent people. Of course, the only way we will be able to do this is if we ourselves are decent people, if we are walking examples of the things we are "preaching" to them.

We all know that the environment we create is ultimately up to us as individuals. No one can take that away from us. A lot of times you hear guys in here complain that this or that unit sucks, that there's too much drama on this or that unit, or that the guards or the system is unfair. Regardless of those opinions, we still have the choice and plenty of opportunities to make things better, to create our own environment and make the best of whatever difficult situation we may be in. Again, no one can take that from us.

But I believe that if we want to create an environment where we can live in peace, where we can relax and develop our potentials and reduce the drama and the madness, old and wise elephants will have to step up and show how it is done.

I say this from experience. I've been in prison for the last 21 years for a crime I committed as a 16 year old. I was once a young, wild elephant and, looking back through the years, I can see where old elephants influenced my thinking and behavior, as well as my environment, for good or bad through their actions and examples. An older elephant taught me how to research and study the law - a skill I have used to help guys here with legal work or other things.

Another one talked to me about the importance of education, even if I had a 35 year sentence to serve. This advice helped me in working towards a degree, becoming a paralegal, obtaining other diplomas for college courses through correspondence, or self-educating myself. These small gestures from "pintos viejos" influenced the way I have served my time.

Now that I'm a "pinto viejo" myself (and a 37 year old grandpa of a super young and wild 3 year old elephant) I see how important it is, and how much of a difference it will make, if we take our responsibilities as old elephants more seriously. If we do, this "jungle" will become a more peaceful place.

In concluding this article, I would like to point out that the story of these young elephants should also make us reflect and think about the importance of our roles as fathers, mothers and grandparents. Our actions and behavior have a huge impact on the youngest members of our families and communities and will define what kind of people they grow up to become. Since they are our future, our roles have an urgent importance. The future world will depend on how seriously we take our roles as older elephants.