



HOW AN INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT BECAME A PORTAL TO 1990S CHICANO GANG LIFE

BY MICHELLE ZENAROSA

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 2015



Guadalupe Rosales morphed her Instagram account into a massive, crowdsourced archive of L.A.'s Chicano gang and party scene in the 1990s.

Michelle Zenarosa

Guadalupe Rosales typed her old friend's name and the word "prison" into Google. She thought the odds of figuring out what happened to him were low, but it was a start.

While living in New York for the last 14 years, Rosales had heard about dozens of friends from her old neighborhood in East L.A. getting locked up, ending up on the streets or worse. Each time, she turned to the Internet to try to fill in the details and reconnect with those she'd lost touch with.

First she tried MySpace, then later Facebook, but most of the time she found nothing.

This time, though, her Google search turned up a possible location for her friend: the Kern County jail.

A little more digging and she got another win. She found his brother's Facebook account, sent him a message and found out how to contact his brother in prison.

What she learned about her friend, whose name she does not want to reveal, was disturbing. She says that after just one arrest, he was sentenced to 43 years in prison for armed robbery. By the time she found him, he had already served 13 years of his sentence.

It's now been more than a year that they've been exchanging letters. Rosales also made him a 22-page booklet filled with old and new photos of places and things from their youth.

"I hate those gaps," Rosales says of the years that her friend was out of touch. "I hate not knowing what's going on."

It was out of those gaps that the social media phenomenon [@veteranas_and_rucas](#) was born.

An ode to the Southern California gang and party scene, Rosales' Instagram account has morphed from her own collection of personal photos to a massive, crowdsourced archive of Chicano life in the 1990s. The feed is a virtual exploration of the past, a way to revisit lost friends and loved ones — and ease her friend's disconnectedness.

"'Veterana' means someone who has put in work or time in the gang culture, and 'ruca' is what you call your chick," Rosales explains. "If you know these words, you can connect with me and the West Coast."

Over the last month, [@veteranas_and_rucas](#) has added about 1,000 viewers per week. As of the time this story was published, the account had more than 18,000 followers.

"What I'm interested in posting is women that look like strong women," Rosales says. "They look tough, and I like showing photographs like that because I want to say that women can be attractive when they're strong women."

Submitters have used the account for dedications to their husbands, wives, parents and people they've lost. Rosales currently receives about five submissions a week, some from folks who are nostalgic about the past and some from a younger generation who never witnessed it — the children of the people in the photos.

"I've had teens who are curious about their parents, who wonder how their parents met or knew their parents were from this gang or party crew, but they never experienced it," Rosales says. "They're learning history and at the same time trying to save and preserve it."



One post brought together two family members who didn't know about each other's existence. A user by the name of @rosiexc commented on a photo submitted by @jessemblue: "how is she ur great grandma? Because she is also mine?"

While Rosales is determined to devote the year-old archive solely to SoCal Chicanos, people from many backgrounds have perused and interacted with the photos, causing Rosales some internal conflict. Once it's on social media, you no longer own it. It's almost like it belongs to everyone.

"Some people will say things like, 'Let's dress like this next weekend for this party or Halloween' or 'Let's take pictures like this' — and then it's like a white hipster [thing]," Rosales says. "I'm exposing this, and there's nothing I can do about it. It's inevitable."

Rosales hasn't yet put a photo of herself on the account. She might one day, she says, because she looks different these days, and maybe no one will recognize her. But for now, she's still not cool with showing the viewers her face.

"The reason why I wanted to keep it anonymous was because I wasn't really telling a story about myself," Rosales says. "If I'm the one behind it, people feel comfortable sharing their photos with me."

Just a few months after she started the account, Rosales' former best friend sent a photo to @veteranas_and_rucas. The two women, both former members of East L.A. party crew Aztek Nation, were once inseparable but hadn't spoken in years. The woman had no idea Rosales was behind the account.

When Rosales finally let her know who she was, the two met up and reminisced over old photos. Rosales even met her kids.

The popularity of the account also has given Rosales the desire to keep expanding the archive. After several people messaged Rosales asking to be educated about the history of that particular time, she sought out local archives — and was surprised to come back empty-handed.

So she approached UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center and proposed a project. Rosales had began collecting photos, video footage, music and fliers from that time and will exhibit the memorabilia on Jan. 20. The exhibit also include a panel of former DJs, flier designers and party crew members.

"This history gets overlooked or [is] not really respected," Rosales says. "So many of us were part of it that it's kind of like, 'How could it not be important?'"



Michelle Zenarosa