



## FREDDY CALIXTO

Born in 1956 in Puerto Rico, Freddy moved to Chicago with his family when he was a baby. In the city neighborhoods where he grew up, gangs were a part of everyday life. Although his father was a strong influence in his life and tried to steer him away from gang activity, Freddy gave in to peer pressure and joined a gang during the summer before he entered 8th grade. Within that group, Freddy found approval, a sense of family, and friends he thought he could depend on.

That same year, Freddy's father transferred him to a parochial school in a new neighborhood. This placed Freddy in the middle of a rival gang's turf, which meant that he became caught up in an escalating cycle of fighting and violence between warring gangs. It was during this troubled period of his life that Freddy met a guy named Lacey Smith who worked for a scrappy, street-smart agency called BUILD. Through Lacey, Freddy became involved in after-school activities and organized sports that included kids from different gangs. He enjoyed the team sports and programs and realized how few differences truly existed between kids from different neighborhoods and groups.

Thirty-five years ago, Freddy Calixto's gang planned to gun down a rival gang member—a boy that Freddy knew from his old neighborhood. Freddy refused to take part in this plan, choosing instead to quit the gang. For his decision to leave the gang, Freddy was severely beaten by his fellow members. He survived the beating and walked away from gang life, but not before convincing the gang to abandon the hit altogether and influencing several others to quit the gang along with him.

That was the moment that 16-year-old Freddy Calixto vowed not only to change his own life, but to use his life to help other young people to change theirs by finding alternatives to gang life and violence—a vow that he has upheld since then.

After graduating from high school, Freddy took a factory job, sweeping floors; he quit after the first day. Freddy knew that he could do more with his life than sweep floors. With guidance and encouragement from BUILD staff and from his family, he applied for loans and scholarships and attended Northeastern University. Through the school's work-study program, Freddy came on board at BUILD as a part-time youth worker while he pursued his degree.

Freddy believed he could have a positive influence on the younger kids because he had been exactly where they were. He knew how badly they needed a mentor, a friend and a direction. Freddy organized sports leagues, social activities, and esteem-building programs in the neighborhood. He actively recruited neighborhood kids to participate, knowing that this was a far better alternative to the gang activity that had become increasingly violent.

In 1979, Freddy became a full-time staff member of BUILD—first as head of the Street Work Program, then leading our Community Resource Program, and ultimately being appointed BUILD's executive director in 1994. He also went on to earn a Masters in Human Resource Development.

In the 30 years that Freddy has served BUILD, the organization has grown and changed in many ways. One thing that has remained unchanged, however, is Freddy's commitment to furthering BUILD's mission to reach out to at-risk youth in the schools and on the streets so they can realize their educational and career potential and contribute to the stability, safety and well-being of our communities.

Tonight we honor Freddy Calixto—a wise and gentle leader—who, through the example of his own life, has taught all of us that it is possible to break the cycle of violence and use your life to save the futures of others.

*Thank you, Freddy!*