

There Is No 'I' in 'Gang'

Gina D. and I were in a lean-to behind the ropes course when we received notice that the E. 22nd ½ Street Cobras had arrived. We were smoking pot and fighting, as usual. This time, we were arguing about the ethnic make-up of the E. 22nd ½ Street Cobras. Gina D. said they sounded Asian. "I thought cobras were from India," I said. "You know, Rikki Tikki Tavi and all that?"

"Rikki Tikki Tavi was a mongoose."

"Thank you for that, Gina. I am familiar with Mr. Kipling's story. A mongoose saves a family from cobra snakes. In India. Are you proposing that the E. 22nd ½ Street Cobras are a Hindu street gang?"

"Not all Indians are Hindu, retard. Like more than twenty percent of the country is Muslim."

"Are you implying that the E. 22nd ½ Street Cobras are an Islamic organization?"

"All I said was that they sounded Asian."

"And all I'm saying is: I don't know what that means."

"Yes, you do," she said.

"Well there probably aren't any Asian street gangs in Baltimore anyway."

"How would you know?"

"Because I grew up in Baltimore and, pardon the generalization, but the Asian population seemed more concerned with going to medical school and forming merchant's associations than joining street gangs from what I could tell."

"You're such a racist..."

"Are not. I was simply being observant of trends."

"Well, I bet they're all black anyway..."

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “Probably. Black Asians, right?”

And on and on like that until Gina D.’s Walkie-Talkie buzzed in and we heard Front Desk Molly’s nervous whisper crackle over the line: “The Cobras are here...” followed by a chorus of sniggers in the background and a big wet-sounding: “Hiiisssssss...”

We hopped in our golf cart and headed back to the lodge. Our coworkers thought it was funny that we had to babysit a street gang.

“So,” Gina coughed, handing me the roach as we putted along. “Are you gonna get jumped in or what?”

“It might be a wise career choice at this point. Think they offer benefits?” I sucked on the joint a couple of times then tossed it overboard. “How about you? Feeling like a joiner?”

“I dunno. Depends what colors they wear.”

“The Collaboration Clinic is located on 12-acres of Maryland wood and marshland, complete with ropes course, game room, banquet hall, movie theater/cafeteria, basketball/tennis court, outdoor chapel, wading pool, and a private pond. Activities include hiking, canoeing, archery, bird watching, cooperative puzzles and games, and navigating a group initiatives course that contains a zip line, rope swing, team problem solving obstacles, and a boxwood maze. The Clinic offers an array of team building retreat packages designed to improve collaboration, boost morale, and increase productivity among board members and employees of corporations, non-profit organizations, churches, sports teams, and any other association with a desire to work together more effectively.”

I wrote that. It's on our website. I didn't want to write it, but nobody else did either and eventually the chore slimed its way down to me. So I guess I'm a published author.

As you can tell from our website, the Collaboration Clinic does not usually serve street gangs – this was our first – so we were all very excited to meet the E 22nd ½ Street Cobras. Staff conversation had buzzed with the prospect all week. Usually we spend our time bickering and taking a lot of breaks.

The E. 22nd ½ Street Cobras were waiting at a table in the banquet hall when Gina D. and I came in, twirling our lanyards like high school gym teachers. I felt bad; one of the Assistant Counselors should have brought them juice and cookies. Some of them were goofing off, others were apparently trying to glare at the floor through the table in front of them, but everyone looked bored with the situation, which is pretty much the same for the corporate clients we normally serve. Different attire, different haircuts, more scars, but still nobody wants to be here.

Gina D. was wrong, by the way. They weren't particularly Asian. One of them was something. ("Tibetan, I think," Gina D. hypothesized. I said Mongolian to spite her.) But, in terms of ethnicity, they were remarkably diverse for a street gang. And they were drawn from a broad range of age groups. There were about twenty gang members in all, although I was assured they "rolled in mobs" on the street and only the top brass was attending the retreat. I was skeptical, but kept my mouth shut. The oldest was a man in his mid-to-late thirties who was sporting a white undershirt and a mustache like Adolf Hitler. The youngest was an effeminate boy with cat-eyes and lipstick who looked about eleven years old. Later on, I would learn that the others called him "The Cat Lady." I was surprised and encouraged to see this lack of

discriminatory membership practices in the modern street gang. If only more of the companies that came here were so forward-thinking about these things.

I will say that the Cobras were lacking in terms of gender equality. From what I could tell, there were only two female gang members. Both were pasty white girls in baggy jeans and flannel shirts. I wondered if they were sisters.

We introduced ourselves and all at once the Cobras flashed gang signs, both hooting and mumbling greetings. I was impressed. The hand symbols were a good sign in terms of their ability to function as a unified body. Their leader stood up to introduce himself with an elaborate hand shake and a brief hug. Gina D. looked a little taken aback during the hug. Our clients don't usually hug us. It has been known to happen on occasion, but always later on in the retreat.

Their leader's name was Day Day. He was a light-skinned boy, only about fourteen years old with a dirt bike jersey and a faded tattoo of a bullet hole on his neck. There were bugs crawling out of the wound. He also had a cross on his forehead. I think he blushed slightly when Gina D. told him she liked his tattoos.

Gina D. started out by giving a PowerPoint presentation on the benefits of a collaborative workplace. She never looks more bored than when she is giving this speech and if you've ever heard it, it's easy to understand why. This time she was chewing gum and even text messaging at times. The Cobras looked catatonic. It was just too early for this. A few of the younger ones kept asking to make prank phone calls on Gina D.'s Walkie-Talkie. At one point I thought she was going to let them.

One thing I did notice was their poor color coordination. From what I could tell, yellow was their gang's color but the shades of yellow they were flying fell all over the spectrum. Blonde, canary, school bus, Dijon mustard, chartreuse. Gina D. and I looked much more uniform

in our teal blue Collaboration Clinic polo shirts. I made a mental note to suggest they choose a more specific palette when we got to know each other better.

After the speech, we headed outside and I gathered everybody into a circle on the worn patch of asphalt we use as a multi-purpose surface for basketball and tennis. Dark clouds formed over the circle but there was no rain.

We were going to play Ice Breakers. Ice Breakers is a bean-bag game designed to open the flow of conversation among members of a group. The rules are very simple: I start off the game by throwing a beanbag at someone in the circle and asking a question while the bag is in the air. Something like "What's your name?" or "What's your favorite animal?" or "When is your birthday?" The person who catches the beanbag must answer the question and then throw it on to someone else and ask their own question. There is no winner in Ice Breakers. That's not the point.

I threw the bag to Gina D. first, just so everyone could see how the game works. I forget what I asked her, but I remember thinking about how stupid she was when she tossed the bag across the circle and yelled, "Where are you from?" The entire circle threw up their E. 22nd ½ Street Cobras gang signs and the bean-bag just plopped on the ground like a turd.

I started the game over. This time, I tossed the bean-bag and asked, "What's your favorite animal?" Again, the circle threw up their gang signs and the bean-bag was ignored. I felt dumb, but encouraged. They weren't catching the bean-bag, this is true, but at least they were not catching it as a team. I had just met them and I was already proud. Still, after we were done with Ice Breakers, I needed to break for a smoke. I sent the gang off to eat the snack they'd missed out on earlier and Gina D. and I went for a ride. At least we had learned some of their names.

We actually ended up learning a little bit more than just names, during this session of Ice Breakers. Day Day, for instance, told us that he had no favorite vacation spot. An uncontrolled “Yes!” leapt like a bug from one of the girl’s throats when someone asked if she had ever owned puppy. I asked a small Latino boy named Stink what he thought about Gina D.’s PowerPoint presentation and he screamed “Fuck that bitch!” which the others thought was hilarious, but made Gina D. shoot me a glare.

We were looking for a shady spot to go smoke.

“Can you believe the head on that one girl?” Gina said, I think to herself.

I pulled off the path and began to roll something up.

“It was absolutely enormous. Like a snowman’s. Surreal.”

“I didn’t really notice,” I told her. “It was hard for me to take my eyes off that guy with the Hitler mustache.”

“You mean the pedophile?”

“Yeah. I think the gang’s leadership needs to be a little more stringent with their background checks. I mean the guy works with children after all.”

“Yeah. Well. Sometimes you do to.”

“I will not dignify that with a response, beyond saying: Give me the lighter.”

We sat in silence for a minute. Then I said, “Can you believe the size of that fat kid?” There was a fat kid. Not that fat really, but big enough for conversation’s sake.

Gina D. and I could always find something to agree on when it came to finding flaws in our clients. That and our mutual distaste for the work. But really, our jobs weren’t all that bad. They were ridiculous for sure, but the work was far from difficult. And our clients weren’t so

bad. They were just like us mostly; they didn't want to be there either. The whole retreat was based on an illusion of effectiveness. We pretended to be enthusiastic, trained professionals for the sake of our jobs and our clients pretended to enjoy or learn from the experience for the sake of theirs. But complaining was a way to keep the conversation going. In a lot of ways, that's all the arguments ever were. The entire staff argued. It gave us something to talk about.

The Cobras also argued a lot, I noticed. When we got back from smoking, a fight had broken out between two of them. They were outside. The others were standing around them in a circle, watching. I looked over at Day Day. I sent him a message with my eyes and my body language (I pointed) that said, "It is your job to go over there and restore order to the team. Assert yourself. Go get 'em, Tiger!"

Day Day charged into the circle and spread the two men apart. They were throwing punches over Day Day's shoulder and spitting at each other, but Day Day stood his ground.

"Tell them how their actions are making you feel, Day Day!" Gina D. yelled.

"Express the importance of unclouded communication channels in the workplace!" I added.

When things had calmed down we took them to the ropes course, which is over 120 feet tall. Gina D. and I walked ahead. We could hear them grumbling behind us. It sounded like they were scared. Gina D. wanted to pretend the ropes were too damp to climb. She said we could save them some face and go slack off ourselves. "Two dragons with one sword," she said. I wanted to see everyone climb. I thought it would be good for them.

"It's 'two birds with one stone,' " I told her.

“That never made any sense to me. Why do you only have access to one stone?” She asked. “Stones are everywhere. And why do you need to kill the birds so urgently? Are they a threat?”

She had a point, but I didn’t want to give it to her.

“It is just the way it goes,” I told her. “They are climbing the ropes.”

The Cobras were either silent or boasting when we reached the base of the ropes course and Gina D. went into the storage hut for harnesses. No one was speaking casually.

It took a long time to organize them into a line and get their harnesses on correctly. We had done this a million times before, but it is never easy when the group is nervous. The Cobras squirmed as we tried to pull the webbed loops over their construction boots and baggy jeans.

Then Gina D. and I stepped aside to discuss something. We usually let the smallest go first just in case there was an accident and they started falling down each other. But in this case, we weren’t sure what to do. In terms of height and weight, Day Day was about in the middle of the group, maybe slightly toward the smaller end, and we could tell maintaining an image of strong leadership was a critical component of this group’s natural structure. Gina D. felt like it was important to let Day Day go first. It would demonstrate his courage and strength to the others. I thought we should send him up last in case he was nervous. I imagined the gang staring up his twitching calves as his sneakers shook on top of the footholds. In the middle seemed to both of us like it might make him look average, or even weak, in comparison to the rest of the group. Somehow, I was able to make Gina D. side with me. I think she didn’t care much at this point. She had already mentioned going back to the lodge for juice a couple times. She prayed for rain. “Let’s just take them inside and play Light As A Feather, Stiff As A Board,” she said. I told her they had paid for the ropes course package. The truth is I didn’t know what package they got.

Gina D. went up the climbing wall section first, then curtsied when she reached the platform on top. The Cobras hooted again and flashed more gang signs.

“Gina D., Ladies and Gentleman,” I said.

She blew kisses down on them like raindrops.

I started sending the small ones up to her, two-by-two, with Gina D. belaying one tiny gang member from above on her side of the wall, while I had another one in a top-rope belay on my side. This was standard procedure for all members of the Collaboration Clinic team.

The youngest, smallest ones scrambled up the wall like squirrels and perched next to Gina D. on the platform. I imagined they used these guys as drug runners or something back in the City. They looked like they could hop over fences.

As they got older and larger, the Cobras’ climbing ability dropped sharply, like off a cliff. Even the ones in their late teens were struggling to hold themselves into the wall, shaking, making little noises of fear as they climbed, sometimes falling and swinging back and forth on belay, calling out as if they were still falling down into the woods, toward the panicked shrieks of the gang waiting below. The girl with big head looked like she was carrying a basket of fruit on top of her skull the way it kept bobbling around. I was looking for someone to catch it in case it fell off.

The Cobras were clearly out of their element. This is the kind of situation where a well-organized team can test its mettle and really shine. That is what I told them. I yelled it as they were climbing to make them feel better about themselves. I told them to support each other. Even as they got up to the top and hugged the tree trunk, panting, they started to jeer at the others climbing below them. Once they were at the top, it was as if they had forgotten the climb.

Then it was Day Day’s turn. I could see he was trembling.

“You don’t have to do this,” I said quietly. “I can tell them the ropes are too damp.”

He looked at me like I had something alive stuck in my teeth.

“Shit, how you gonna tell them about damp ropes when they just climbed up with them bitches?”

I felt bad for him. I didn’t want him to lose face.

I can pretend I got a call on the Walkie-Talkie, I said. I’ll say there are clouds coming and we need to get inside. Gina D. will just push them down the zip-line and we’ll all go back for more snack time.

“Your fat girlfriend’s Walkie-Talkie better blast too if you gonna be pretending your’s going off.”

The kid was pretty smart.

“They know you ain’t in charge of shit,” he said.

I couldn’t argue with him. I just shook my head.

“I got to climb,” he said. He looked like a teen in a sports movie. I awaited the climbing sequence.

It was awful. I don’t think Day Day had ever climbed before, except maybe hopping over a fence or going up a short ladder. There was a lot of flailing and clinging to the rock and even more tears involved. If his rope wasn’t damp before, I thought to myself, but I didn’t feel good about the joke. I thought I probably wouldn’t mention it to Gina D. later.

The Cobras rooted him on at first, especially the smaller ones. Gina D. and I tried to encourage them to keep cheering as their leader stood petrified and trembling against the fake rock. He was up there so long it became impossible to keep up morale. The children’s faces hung

slack. The older members of the gang averted their eyes. Their whole unit felt the weight of Day Day's failure. His legs kicked as I lowered him to the ground.

It was a sad day for juice. The clouds did come in and it started raining. I felt bad that I had taken them to the ropes course at all. I should have listened to Gina D. We should have played Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board.

I watched the gang nip and pick at each other while they had snack. Some were quiet. Others sneered or called each other names. Everyone was defensive. The rain was loud. It sounded like faraway machine gun bullets on the hard plastic roof of our of golf cart outside. Day Day at the head of the cafeteria table and stared at the cookies in front of him. Nobody talked to him. I thought he might kill somebody with them if they did. I was standing in the doorway watching. There were several other counselors around. Gina D. poked me in the back as she walked past in the hallway. It was definitely time to smoke pot.

We put on our raincoats and I drove down the trail. Neither of us said anything. I felt a little sick in my stomach. I pictured the gang falling apart when they got back to the neighborhood, maybe fighting and killing each other over the summer. Even worse, I imagined them not being friends anymore, breaking apart, leaving to join other gangs. It was sad to think about.

We parked beneath the ropes course platform for shelter. The air smelled wet, like root vegetables or clods of dirt. I was waiting for Gina D. to say "I told you so..." but she didn't. Instead she just watched me roll a joint and handed me a lighter when she saw me feeling around for one.

"Teamwork," she said.

