

MAN ON FIRE PRESENTS
**THE COMBUSTION
CHRONICLES**

**EPISODE TWENTY-NINE
A KING'S VOICE FOR A BETTER WAY**

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Shawn: Welcome to *The Combustion Chronicles* podcast, where bold leaders combined with big ideas to create game-changing disruption. I'm Shawn Nason, founder of Man on Fire, and your host for *The Combustion Chronicles* podcast. Throughout this series, we're bringing together the most unique and influential minds we could find to have honest conversations about not being okay with the status quo, blowing shit up, and working together to influence our shared future. We believe that when bold leaders ignite consumer-centric ideas with passion and grit, the result is an explosion that creates a better world for all of us.

On this episode we have Antonio Fernandez, AKA King Tone. In 1997, a few months after his appointment as leader of The Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation, New York chapter, *The New York Times* posed the question whether Antonio was a man of vision or of violence. They concluded he was the former, a man with the self-assigned mission of transforming The Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation, New York chapter from an organized-crime syndicate to a political movement fighting for social justice on behalf of the suppressed Latin American community.

Antonio is a true rarity and a paradox. He seemed set for life of addiction and crime until he went to prison and found solace in a gang. He saw something in the criminal organization that others didn't, a place that offered the structure and love that he needed to beat addiction. From his own experiences, he knew The Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation had more to offer. Mirroring the activism of groups such as the Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam, he wanted to reform and rebrand the Latin Kings and its 7,000 members. The police called him a gangster with a PR campaign, but to many he was a symbol of hope. His journey from a drug dealer to political activist will reveal inspiring stories of innovation, grassroots change, rebranding, and ingenuity. Antonio, welcome to *The Combustion Chronicles*.

Antonio: Hey, thank you for having me, that was pretty cool. I remember that "Times" piece.

Shawn: Well, that's awesome. I want to get right into this and do some level setting with the listeners, Antonio. So, can you tell me, specifically, what is the Latin Kings and particularly The Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation, the New York chapter that you led, and what originally attracted you to them?

Antonio: Well, first of all, you know, thank you for having me, and yeah so, in that time of my life, I was a youngster, and my mother and father were Puerto Ricans and I'm a third generation. So, when that was out there in the early '70s and '80s, you know, it was a tough place, Brooklyn, New York, very impoverished, not many jobs. But in all formalities, what I'm

saying, the structure of community was broken. Heroin was the number one thing they sold, that was the number one brand and product in East New York, Brooklyn. That other number one product was fear, violence, you know? So, at third grade, when a teacher kept using my being Spanish and not understanding the American alphabet, I started feeling stupid and that was the time that I said, "This system isn't for me. It insults me, it treats me inferior, and I don't want that feeling." While the guys that are pushing the CLD dope brand and all these, they brought a new system, I can say, a system of money, that we could have had and gave to us from that money they made. So, I saw that as an opportunity.

And, of course, in doing that, I lost my home values that my father and mother married, now 60 years, you know, taught me, respect, honesty, knowledge, love, all those things. And it became a real dark road when I got lost seeking my self-image and understanding the capitalistic system of "good means rich and bad means poor", and not getting confused in those titles that are placed upon poor communities. So, I ended up in jail for the first time in 1989, and it was a minor drug sale with possession. And, of course, I went in there broken, with no... I lost the hope of the spiritual, the Bible, the church because I tried all Christian programs, didn't work for me for whatever reasons, some mine, some theirs. I've tried the government programs, and none could really have touched me and found what was wrong with me, of course, what they didn't know what was wrong with me, I didn't know who I was. I knew about a black great movement, and I knew about the white, and the supreme and that story, but in the middle there's brown people, and our story's barely told from Puerto Rico and all that. So, I was so lost in my identity that I wanted to know more than my addiction, and what I found in and the The Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation, New York State tribe, one of their members in that dark place called Rikers Island is where all the guys who go to court or are charged with something meet, and it's one of the biggest colonies, jail colonies on earth. Look it up, Rikers Island, New York State.

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So, in that world with grown men that got addiction, they put me there when I was most broken, and people could have abused me, could have done worse than I was already doing to myself, but this brother named King Mafia saw what was ailing me. Because I used to cause trouble and I almost caused a racial riot, and he pulled me, that Latin King brother, and he said, "Listen, you're real, you've got bravery, but you're one stupid mother fucker. You ready to start a war for calling on the phone and I know you ain't got nobody to call because you're a crack head, right?" And I looked at him and I wanted to fight him, but I knew it was coming from a place of love. He said, "Well, let us help you, we're going to teach you to read, we're going to teach you to write, we're going to teach you the beauty of you being Puerto Rican." And in that

instant, that moment, I wanted to learn for the first time again since Mr. Chodesh [SP] in third grade, a white man with blue eyes, told me I was stupid, and I would never amount to nothing. And I had seen somebody in a jail broken, who had an addiction, and was glowing like he's just met Jesus.

Shawn: Wow.

Antonio: And I said, "Let me taste those waters." And that's what happened in 1989, I struck my right knee to the ground and I made an oath to represent The Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation, New York State lion tribe in Rikers Island. And in 6 months, I learned to read, I learned to recite 32 pages of literature, that's pretty difficult. The point is, that's what the Almighty Father, King of Kings put in my direction, not the Marines, not the Boy Scouts. They were at the place when I needed someone most, and King Mafia was that extension, that olive branch that gave me the wanting to rejoin society. And when I found them and when I learned to read, then I wanted to learn about great people. And then I learned about great men that were Puerto Rican and great organizations, and I started my quest to finding who I was, proud representing The Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation. What's scary is, we don't know what's going to happen to us for our ignorance. To this moment, I practice, and I read, and I know my prayers, and I keep them dear to my heart because that's my NA, that's what keeps me clean. That's what keeps me believing that there's a better way and there's a higher power.

Shawn: Wow, so much to unpack right there already, Antonio, just what you shared. And, you know, when I think of your story, the two things I heard as you were just sharing, you know, this third-grade teacher that told you that you were stupid and what an impact that had on your life. But then, when you got into prison and you met King Mafia, what a role model he became for you. And so, leaning into that, like, speeding up then, here you are, you're appointed the leader of The Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation in the New York chapter there, what was the change that you wanted to see, and then, as the leader, how did you approach it?

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Antonio: Well, you know, first of all, you know, if it was that simple to go from the third grade to being the lead of The Almighty Latin King from that time that I put my right knee to the ground and I made an oath, right? So, with everything I ever knew, I remember my father's words, and they stood dear to my heart and even when I was a crack head, "You make an oath to God, you keep it, you hear me, son?". And I broke every other oath to every living being, sometimes, but he told me, "When you stand before God to make an oath, you keep that because your life will become a living hell once you break that oath to yourself and God." And

when I hit the Latin Kings, I remembered that that was one and I made an oath, right? But what happened when I started reading that literature of the Lolita Lebrón's, of the Black Panthers', of the Nation, Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary*, and by my brother Martin Luther King, it brought this fire within my soul and I knew we had a membership, I knew we had the most beautiful literature I've ever read, because I've read the Quran, I've read the Bible, I've read some of the Torah. I'm a man who was seeking knowledge, now, I'm thirsty, I was hungry. So, when I read, they still didn't compare to the feeling I got when I read my lessons. The first thing I call every gang is a power group. So, you call them, so they will become. If you're destined to want to make them a gang, three black kids will become a gang member. So, I said, "How do I teach my people to get away from the three most profitable things in our lives, murder, fear, extortion, drug dealing, which is a short distance into success, we still end up in the jails, if we transformed that into jobs, activism, mobility, workforce." And when I came home in 1992, that was my goal. And I just didn't jump there, I had beautiful men and women like Mafia that was nurturing my leadership, and as I went up the ladder, instead of fearing me and killing me, like most books tell you, they endeared my new ideas and they said, "Well, when you go home, fool, make it happen." That my ingenuity and my humbleness has me going up fast.

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And when we brought that and I started demonstrating it, it drew them to that heat, to that sun, to that fire, to that cap that I was preaching when one of the deadliest violence moments was happening through our nation. And a lot of us was ignorant or we didn't understand that fire. I started telling my people, "Hey, we've got to read this literature, the Bible, and make the words within it true. We have gone away from what we were really destined to become from false information and let's start changing." So, the first three things I did really quickly is take from out of the parks in the dark into safe spaces, which are churches, which is the community center. People who accepted us the way we were and wasn't telling me to destroy the brand, to accept change, but to rebuild the brand, keep what's good, which was the unity and destroy the stinking thinking.

So, in that moment, I knew we found the remedy. We had power in unity. All we had to do was convince our community that we were not who they were being told. And that's when I took the first step and opened the doors and started telling the community, "We are here. We are the new, new guy on the block. And by our actions and our rallies, we will prove to you that we are seeking justice." And when the kids seen the power of unity, of going into churches, and mothers coming to the meetings, and wives, it changed the atmosphere of the machismo in the gang. And when we put that beautiful Q, the Queens into the brand, and made us more accountable to our wives, our mothers, our daughters, it made us strong as men, it made us

more accountable to move away from the murder, the fear, and the extortion, and to longevity, and to this new movement we were bringing under the rebranding of, "Not that we're new or Tony brought a new message, Tone retaught us what we've forgotten." And that's the question, right? What happens when the bad guy becomes the good guy?

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Shawn: I love that. It's a powerful question, "What happens when the bad guy becomes a good guy?" And, you know, I don't want to turn this into a big, what I would say, religion discussion, but deeply rooted in what you're talking about, Antonio, is this deep root in spirituality, whatever that may be to any listener. What I'm hearing through your words, and I love when you talked about hope. And we've been talking a lot recently about courage and the times that we live in right now, that we need hope, and we need courage to move and we need leaders to do that, and you did that. And now, let's be really real, though, Antonio, on the flip side of that, I want to ask you this question around, what were some of the biggest obstacles that you faced when you were trying to shift these mindsets of the gang, of the group around you? You built this amazing community, but you had to face some big obstacles. Do you want to share one or two of those with us?

Antonio: Yeah, of course. You know, that's the first thing, right? So, I asked the question, I'll answer it. What happens when the bad guy becomes the good guy? We've got to return to looking at the heart of the man, the side of humanity that doesn't have a political party, doesn't have a preference of sex. It has the preference of, could we share air, could we share space? So, I refused to accept that. That's one, government. Second was your prophet is never recognized in his hometown. But you know what? God is good, the Almighty was good to me. I'm not much of a shooter. I give a lot of love to my enemy and it repaid me, and thank God that I lived through the most confusing times and the most challenging times in the nation when they said, "We don't accept change, what is is what is and will be." And I said, "No, then we're not who we said we are." So, you've got to be all in. When you want something and you want to bring change, you've got to be ready for the cross because they're coming from your own. Because change is hard, it makes you move, it makes you hope, it makes you leave that comfort spot.

And then lastly was my self desire to believe that I was the only one, that I knew it all, and that now that I've brought them to the pinnacle of being accepted, they had to serve me. I had to always remember that any time I make any object or a man bigger than our main one, the crown, we got trouble. So, I taught the crown will always remain the same, the faces under the crown change, but those values got to stay. So, the man, we respect under it, but the values and what holds us to that promise, that oath, to our community that we are the guiding light

for those who seek and are denied it, us, the Latin Kings, that's what we say in our prayer, we must be that. And those were the three hardest obstacles. And, you know the hardest that never came was money. Nobody wanted to invest in a million-dollar fucking idea. Twenty years ago, we wrote a book on it, Dave Brotherton. Look at it, Dr. Dave Brotherton from John Jay College is on Amazon. *The Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation: A Transformation from a Gang to Grassroot Leadership*. And if you read that book, that's what we did 20 years ago. We showed how to get the cure. The credible messenger is the gang. Their strength is that they already know how to unite, that's not what we should be trying to break. It's the stinking thinking replaced my community, opportunity, and spiritual growth of hope will change the gang to a power group who will hold us accountable when we don't do what's right for their people. If this coronavirus medicine only goes to upstate New York where the grass is greener, we're supposed to make sure that those jars get down to East New York, where our mothers and grandfathers are suffering. That's what I want, that's the biggest challenge.

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It was quite scary but when I reached the top, I understand when Luther King said, and I'm not saying mine was as great, but when I was seeing kids, stop believing in the gun, stop believing and beating their wives sometimes, or stop believing that going to jail make them a Latin King. But what really made them a Latin King is paying child support, going to work, not hurting your neighbor, and none of those other guys in color are your enemy because they are human. So that was my biggest task. And that's what I continued to do to this day. Because it ain't just a gang remedy. The three steps are the innovation, the steps I take to rebrand something and make it strong, it ain't just for gangs, cut that shit out, it's for communities.

Shawn: Yeah. So, you know, Antonio, the one thing, and you said this earlier, that you remember from your dad, you know, that you make an oath and you keep it. You know, when you make that oath with God, and again, we've been talking about a lot around spirituality and that. I remember being a young man, 12 or 13 years old, and what keeps resonating through my head is what I had a pastor tell me when I was that age. And I'll never forget it, he sat me down and he said, "You'll never remember a sermon I preach; you'll never remember many of the things here, but what I want to tell you is always take the high road." And that's what I hear you in the message that you preached, that you lived is, "We're going to take the high road, we're going to show them how it's going to be different." And so, when I start to think about that, you know, I want to flip this a little bit to the business world and even to leaders because I think there's such a powerful message in what you're saying and what you're living. So, taking all of this that you've learned, all your experience, what advice, Antonio, do you have for leaders who want to shift their organization's cultures, shift their mindset, even shift, we've

been talking a lot about heartsets, but to leaders, because what I'm really hearing is, you were labeled, people didn't want you to change but yet you did it. It wasn't easy, it was hard, it was difficult. So, what advice would you give leaders right now to help make that shift in their organizations or even to people in their personal life?

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Antonio: If you go to *Prime Time* there's another video they did "All the King's Men," a segment where they followed me. And I told one of my members in national TV, when everybody in the world was used to us being violent, I told them in that national TV, "but I love you and I'm not." And that changed my whole career and my business when I said, "What does love look like in a gang," right? What I found is, when I asked the Kings, "What does love look like in the Kings?" They had to answer the question, right? So, if you asked it to yourself in a business, "What does love look like for the janitor?" Is the money going or I'm making him to have more profit, is he using dirty mops? Do I make the shields only two feet when they're supposed to be six feet to protect my customer because I saved money, but it looks, by the blind eye, that it's high enough?

So, what I'm saying is, when you, as the CEO, when you're the first, the first thing is the people love to serve someone who shows them serves them and appreciates. So, every victory went to the 7,000 Latin Kings that marched, not King Tone. The TV made me the face of the movement, but I always knew that I was as strong as the last weakest King there, so I had to reach him also and make him believe in hope. So, if he was dealing drugs, if he was into something that by the rallies and the medicine, and seeing me, his leader, the dude that was supposed to be the scariest dude bowing down and kissing the feet of a mother in public, the example! Or when I was threatened and pushed by cops and beaten, I never lifted my voice. And when my enemies came with guns, I gave them back to them. And they used to say, "Tone, you're crazy." I said, "No, I'm not crazy. If I shoot back, I break my model, I break the new brand." So as a CEO, the first thing, look closely at what you've built and what you've called your brand in your heart and your mind when you were the only worker, when you were the one answering the phone, when you were running it ragged until you built it to where it is today. Don't let money ever sacrifice that feeling and that sacrifice you did, because that's what every employee does when he joins your brand, Levi, whatever brand you push. So that's the first thing, what does love look like in your company?

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Second, where do I give my people to have safe spaces, to share, to enjoy, to talk, to fail, to succeed, all knowing it all helps us build the brand? Where do I get the people that helped me

build it in the beginning? Know just because change is coming doesn't mean we're forgetting your wisdom and the knowledge that you kept us to this day, but there's a new world and you're going to see how we're going to take what you put in and make it reach the next generations. So that was the second I involved, I made safe spaces for leaders to talk and not think they're going to get killed for saying, "You know what, King Tone is an asshole, he screams a lot. And in the meetings, they're nine-hour meetings! Who the hell goes to nine-hour meetings?!" When I heard that voice, I didn't put it out, I gave it fuel. Because I wanted to know, did another 800 people feel like him? Because, like I said, I had to make sure that just because I'm the CEO of The Almighty Latin King in New York State lion tribe, I was not the owner of the people. I was the head example of what our literature and our statement said to the society. And what we were preaching was, "We are the guiding light to those who seek you or seek to deny us." So, I taught them the brand, I made them appreciate the brand. So those are the things, safe spaces, giving your people what they're due, their share of what love looked like in profit, and most of all is that, right? Appreciate them for making our dream, my brand, the Latin Kings, do what it was supposed to do and benefit the profits when it does what it's supposed to do.

And that was it, I won back the community's love so they purchased the love. And instead of a mother telling her kid, "Don't go to King Tone and join the Latin King." This is a true story, they used to send them to the church on 126, where there was another 2,000 kids going to Sunday church because King Tone was preaching. And imagine when a mother and a grandmother brings you their son and says, "Tone, they say you're a gang but could you help my son?" So that's what I'm talking about. Once you become your brand, you protect yourself, that means you protect all those that stand with you, bringing that bread to your table. We love our community. The brand sells, credible messages. So that's what you've got to do, be the brand, be who you are, and love those who get you where you want to be. And eat with them, eat with them. Not the other people who are coming in to buy stock in your brand and start going all that way. Feed the ones who got you where you're at, the plan will stay forever.

Shawn: Powerful, powerful, powerful. So, something that we want to leave our listeners with this season is this call to action. And so, what is the one thing, Antonio, that you would want our listeners to take away from your story and what you have shared with us today? The one thing, this call to action that they need to go do.

Antonio: When Mafia pulled me, I was fighting for the phone because if you had the phone in jail and you call somebody, it meant you still had connections in the world, someone who loved you. But because of the way I acted and the way I behaved, there was nobody on the other side

of my phone call, but I was still willing to fight in jail and stand and risk my life holding that phone for 15 minutes knowing that it was just a ringtone. That's the reality, I just wanted them to think somebody loved me and I was loving them back through that phone so I could have my place in earth that made you valued in jail. Mafia seen through all that and he said, "Your reality is you're 98 pounds wet, you're a crack head, you haven't shaved your hair, you smell like shit, and it's time that you clean your shit up. You don't need the phone; you need to fix yourself." And I did my best to do so.

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So, what people could do today in this movement is do what I do. Come on, community, come on, America. Why aren't we looking ourselves in the mirror, America? We are the example to the world and we're arguing about wearing a mask? We're arguing if the man should leave the house. We're arguing about everything except telling those families that lost all these people there's hope on the way, we're crying with you. I ain't saying the other part is it but what is now isn't what it is. So, if color movement is forget your political feeling, the gang you rep, the business you run. Let's become human again in America for one time. Let's not listen to all the screens on CNN, on Fox News and all the medias and your Facebook. Sit down and say, "Could we share air? Is this letting us help those that help us breathe? Most of all, are we treating each other with love?" And that ain't the answer, man. We, as a unit, have to be the real people we are in America, me an example, and says, "We're not asking you to leave, we're telling you to leave." Always choose hope and the truth, and that's the only time you could bring a remedy, that's the only time you're going to see healing. Please be true to thyself. Look at where we at, and as America, as Americans, as humans, let's get past this. And that takes the move of honesty, respect, unity, knowledge, and love, values that will bring any system together if they do those five. So, I'll leave you with that, man.

Shawn: You're good, Antonio. We do this thing at the end of each of our podcasts that we call the "Combustion Questions". And they're three questions that are...

Antonio: All right.

Shawn: ...that are randomly selected, that you have no idea about. And you've got to give us your quick gut response. So, there are three quick fire questions here, Antonio. So, the first one of your "Combustion Questions" is, what's your favorite breakfast cereal?

Antonio: Why would you do that? I love cereal and I love to eat it dry. I'm going to say Frosted Flakes, Tony the Tiger.

Shawn: Tony the Tiger, Frosted Flakes. Love it. Would you prefer to go camping in the most beautiful place in the world or have a spa vacation at a fancy resort?

Antonio: Oh, no. Me and Junior would love to be in California, Redwood Trees. I would love to see the high trees. I want to go to The Grand Canyon... You already hear me, anything that involves seeing God at His best, which is out in nature.

Shawn: I love it. Okay. Now this one is the hard one. What do you think about dad jeans?

Antonio: Dad jeans?

Shawn: Yes.

Antonio: Well, since you brought it up, I love them!

Shawn: Well, awesome. Antonio, thank you. I can't wait for the day that we can actually give each other a hug and meet, but thank you for sharing your heart, your story, your love with us, your courage, all of that. And what a powerful message so thank you for that. Stay safe, be well, and we'll talk to you soon, Antonio.

Antonio: All right. Thank you. Love, everyone. Remember, love is change.

Shawn: Thank you so much for listening to this episode of *The Combustion Chronicles*. None of this is possible without you the listener. If you'd like to keep the conversation going, look up Man on Fire on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and at manonfire.co. Give us a shout. Let us know what you think. And please, subscribe, rate, and review if you like what we're doing and if you don't do it anyways. And remember, always stay safe and be well.