

Raul's Story: Bridging the Gap

Throughout the duration of my stay inside the corrections system I always knew that my experience meant a lot more than what I could possibly grasp. Being inside an adult prison a few days after I had turned seventeen and gradually ending up in the Juvenile Correctional Facility, a place where I was sent to rehabilitate myself, I realized that my obstacles had just begun. My decisions that led me to where I stood were a consequence of the norms and dynamics that I was accustomed to and had learned to expect. For years I had been recidivating. It seemed as if I would never break the perpetual cycle that I had placed myself in. Before I turned eighteen years old I had nothing but time to reflect and realized that the life that I was living was not for me. I was in the midst of the usual pandemonium and chaos that roamed about as if without fury, inside the lockdown unit in Tehachapi State Prison in a level four yard, when I questioned the meaning of my life.

Before I say more, I would want everyone to know that above all I truly regret what I did in order to get where I was. Mere words can not adequately express, relate nor exemplify the empathy and remorse that I feel for all of the victims and their loved ones involved with or around my crimes. To say sorry would be the least I can do...

As I sat in the round piece of steel that was called a seat, I stared out into the great distance of the Mojave Desert through a slim window and reflected. I was facing more time for something I had no legal fault in and was housed in solitary confinement, better known as the S.H.U. Regardless of where the fault lie I took the time to do some soul searching. I searched deep with in me and allowed positive thoughts to roam freely since I had learned to suppress them long ago. This event, called the moment of Logic and Reason, was when I began to question my purpose, the emotional, physical, financial and mental strain that I had caused upon my family, my loved ones, my community, my victims and those who looked upon me. At that point I could only manage to think and compare all of the things that others have said to me through out the years and the way that most people that I had completely ignored predicted where I would end up eventually, just like thousands of others. It should be noticed that most inmates enter the correctional system in their early teens and are limited in the knowledge and the experiences of having responsibilities that are essential to a successful re-entry. Because of this, I began to read books and tried earnestly not to focus much on my situation for the possibility that I would see the "streets," was still some what possible and I knew I was against major odds. I kept an open mind to different ideas and philosophies of people from different cultures and read any thing besides fictional books, comics and stories. I observed the way most mentors, state employees, and the like, carried their tasks in a peaceful and harmonic manner inside the prison. I soon began to internalize their norms to the best of my ability. Seeing the way that most civilians around me lived positive and meaningful lives, I got inspired to pursue a well rounded education knowing that it was within my best interest to advance and achieve the things that I only dreamed of. I began to catch up on the missing credits and spent most of my days doing things that would benefit me in the long run. 110 credits later I graduated and waited a year in order to take and pass the exit exams.

Well, I continued to pay attention to the conversations that took place late at night, as my peers would talk about their Parole experiences, where they failed and in what aspects the parole process failed for them. I asked by my peers' questions and challenged their responses. There were major issues that arose in each conversation. For the sake of my personal welfare and safety I will not go into details about how many obstacles I underwent in order to transition away from the gang lifestyle but to say the least it was by far the hardest decision I have ever made in my life. I mean how can I say to a person, that I have given up my identity my character and my values only to try to begin new and foreign morals and values? That I have turned a full 180 degrees from the only way I knew how to live. With the knowledge and experience that I gained there is no way that I could stand idle and do nothing about the unfortunate people like myself who continue to come back to jail time periodically.

Well that was inside, now that I have been paroled with no assistance from county and State resources I can see all too well why so many fall short of making something positive out of their lives and end up doing what they know best, "crimes." Thanks to Project Our Home Inc. a Non-profit Organization, I was able to enroll into College full time, get my C.A. Drivers License and I.D. I got a job part time that is flexible with my school schedule with health benefits, I am provided with a stable house away from the crazy and hectic environment that I was released to. For the first time in my life I am able to feel secure and at ease which allows me to dedicate my life fully to the ministry, college and getting my life situated. It is almost as if all the fog has cleared from my life and as I stare into the clearing I found my purpose in life. A few of the reasons why I have faith in this program is the message that it brings to me. Its primary objective is to move from charity towards ownership. This method promotes and encourages me to take control of my life without the feeling of being a burden unto someone. The fact that it is only a transitional period allows me to focus on my current problems and plan for my future. I now have a team of mentors that help me in making major decisions and provide feedback and support. Even with all the help, I have encountered numerous problems and obstacles that in the past would have hindered my ability to grow. The fact that I had changed my lifestyle does not by any means mean that the environment that I was in does not have understanding that I no longer participate in the sub-culture and thus I placed my life in great danger by performing daily tasks like, going to the store and buying milk or putting gas in the car. I am marked with the errors of my past. Yes one could say I deserve to look over my shoulder for the rest of my life because of my previous mentality however is it not the main objective of an assertive and responsive community to address and correct the gang violence issue which kills thousands of lives across the country annually? Not just that, but break the continuous cycle in which most prisoners recidivate? Where is the answer? Everyone is keenly aware that recidivism has spiked to an all time high and that the California Prison System is overly capacitated.

So what is Project Our Home's response? It is with in the programs structure to address all aspects in **bridging the gap between prison and reintegration into the community is which is properly assessed not just by so called professionals but guided by the feedback of the people whom are experiencing these great**

undermined obstacles on a daily bases. Why is Project Our Home novel or different from other existing programs? The program is quality centered versus the typical sober living and half way houses where quantity and funds seem to be the objective. The program strives to provide all of the necessities and support by allowing fully trained volunteers and mentors assigned to different areas of specific needs of each individual. In short it is not a generalized program but an individual case plan is set according to the individual resident's aspirations and needs. The actual resident makes his plans and the team assists him and guides him in that direction. An old friend of mine got released a month after me and has got shot at twice, has been inside the sheriffs station all with in his first two weeks. He has tremendous talent and charisma and had put his old life away while he was still in CYA yet I am not so sure if he will make it to the end of this month. For the past four years I have watched people come back because traditional half way houses and most homes lacked resources, structure and support.

I never thought that I would make it past my eighteenth birthday because I was so entrenched with my criminal and violent habits and now I am only a few days away from turning eighteen and continuing to follow my dreams of becoming an architectural engineer while helping those who are usually forgotten. I thank God for blessing me with the rationality that allows me to internalize the positive side of life. If you have any questions or are interested in visiting our web site log on to www.projectourhome.org