

Making Good One Semester at a Time

Formerly Incarcerated Students (and Their Professor) Consider the Redemptive Power of Inclusive Education

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Preface

My name is James M. Binnall, and I am an Assistant Professor at California State University, Long Beach. Roughly 12 years ago, I walked out of a maximum-security prison in central Pennsylvania. My journey from convict to professor began behind bars, when I petitioned prison administrators to allow me to take the Law School Admission Test. Upon release, I enrolled in the only law school that would allow me to begin my legal studies while still on active state parole. Since then, I have won admission to the California State Bar, earned my Ph.D., and published numerous articles on criminal law, punishment, and the civic marginalization of convicted felons. Like many former offenders, I found self-confidence and hope in education. I poured myself into my studies, striving to excel at what I considered a second chance at life. Now, as a professor and a mentor to former offenders, I repeatedly witness the transformative power of inclusive education.

Introduction

Community involvement and immersion are necessary precursors to successful reentry (Fox, 2015). Like California State University, Long Beach, institutions of higher education that are willing to accept students with a criminal past seemingly understand this basic fact, and take a decidedly strengths-based approach to reintegration (Maruna & LeBel, 2003; Bazemore & Stinchcomb, 2004a, 2004b). The strengths-based model conceptualizes former offenders “as assets to be managed, rather than liabilities to be supervised” (Travis, 2005, p. 7). Inclusive institutions see value in the experiences of those who have been directly or indirectly impacted by the criminal justice system, and offers those shut out of many civic and

social outlets a chance to thrive. Such efforts facilitate reintegration in a host of ways.

Inclusion breeds a change in a former offender's self-concept (Maruna, 2001). Notably, research suggests that to successfully reintegrate into society, former offenders must reconcile their criminal pasts with their aspirational law-abiding present and future selves (Bazemore & Maruna, 2009; Maruna, 2001). As part of that process, former offenders often build a personal desistance narrative (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Vaughan, 2007). As King (2013a) explains, "it is the building of a desistance narrative which underpins the development of new identities" (p. 152). To build a desistance narrative, many former offenders make use of a "redemption script" (Maruna, 2001, p. 87).

Redemption scripts typically reinterpret a criminal past, not as a negative, but as a positive. Such reinterpretation highlights the value of having been there, allowing a former offender to move past embarrassing, and sometimes tragic life events (Bazemore, 1999). As Maruna explains, "[s]ometimes the benefits of having experienced crime and drug use are literal . . . [e]x-offenders say they have learned from their past lives, and this knowledge has made them wiser people" (2001, p. 98). For many of my students, who have had contact with the criminal justice system, they have moved beyond their pasts by calling on the negative experiences in their lives and reframing those experiences in constructive ways, such as a source of wisdom. In this way, many of my students have initiated their own desistance process (King, 2013b).

Still, without external corroboration of reformation, former offenders will struggle with the label of "convicted criminal" or "convicted felon" (Middlemass, 2017; Matsueda, 1992; Matsueda & Heimer, 1997; Bontrager, Bales, & Chiricos, 2005). In order to overcome societal labels or the mark of a criminal record (Pager, 2003), delabeling must occur (Maruna, LeBel, Mitchell, & Naples, 2004).¹ This is a necessary step because "[u]ntil ex-offenders are formally and symbolically recognized as 'success stories,' their conversion may remain suspect to significant others, and most importantly to themselves" (Maruna, 2001, p. 158). The most powerful form of delabeling comes from structures and institutions that may have taken part in a former offender's initial labeling (i.e., criminal justice authorities; Maruna et al., 2004). As Maruna et al. (2004) explain:

if the delabeling [process] were to be endorsed and supported by the same social control establishment involved in the "status degradation" process of conviction and sentencing (e.g., judges or peer juries), this public redemption might carry considerable social and psychological weight for participants and observers

(p. 275).

Accordingly, powerful affirmation can also come from official institutions and structures, like colleges and universities. Winning admission to an institution of higher education – where all the “straight-laced” students attend – demonstrates a level of acceptance that can bolster the self-esteem of a former offender, helping to shore up their “new” personal narrative, which is under construction.

Finally, acceptance into an inclusive institution of higher learning facilitates reintegration by offering former offenders the chance to engage in what Cressey (1955) termed, “reflexive reformation” (p. 119). Through reflexive reformation, offenders who are immersed in inter-offender rehabilitative efforts feel compelled to conform to pro-social group norms and behaviors (Cressey, 1955, 1965; Reissman, 1965). Studies in the substance abuse treatment context support these findings, demonstrating that the “professional ex” (Brown, 1991) or “wounded healer” (White, 2000) paradigms² benefit formerly addicted counselors and their clients by providing “a reference group whose moral and social standards are internalized” (Brown, 1991, p. 227).

For students impacted by the criminal justice system who counsel other former offenders on the benefits of higher education, these experiences have proven reformatory. Indeed, research demonstrates that former offenders who come together for a pro-social goal derive extraordinary benefits from these types of interactions (LeBel, Richie, & Maruna, 2015; Heide-mann, Cederbaum, Martinez, & LeBel, 2016; Perrin, Blagden, Winder, & Dillon, 2017). In such a setting, when former offenders share their personal stories and journeys with each other, they are encouraged to call on their experiences, however deviant, in an effort to aid others struggling to readjust to a society from which they were plucked months, years, and sometimes decades earlier.

Rising Scholars

Today, Dr. Binnall is the faculty advisor to Rising Scholars, a student organization for formerly incarcerated students and students directly impacted by the criminal justice system. Rising Scholars connects these students to resources and information that are designed to increase their success, and was made possible because California State University, Long Beach, opened its doors to formerly incarcerated students.

Rising Scholars became a reality because a particular group of former offenders doggedly pursued their own desistance narratives by reframing their criminal pasts and engaging in the selfless practice of aiding other former offenders trying to access higher education. Their stories are not unique; rather, what is unique about the men and women who founded Rising Scholars is their commitment to those who will follow their lead. What follows are the stories of the founding members of Rising Scholars at California State University, Long Beach.

Irene Sotelo (Co-Founder)

My name is Irene Sotelo. I have a son, a daughter, and two grandchildren. I am a cancer survivor, a victim of domestic violence, and a recovering addict who was formerly incarcerated in a California state prison for women. I am also currently a graduate student in the Master of Social Work program at California State University, Long Beach. I have a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology and a minor in Criminal Justice. My hope is to work with former offenders and to help them accomplish their goals, even in the face of a criminal past.

At age eleven, my mother, who was a victim of domestic violence, committed suicide. I was the oldest of five children. This experience was very traumatic for all of us, and this is where my life took a turn for the worse. At the time, I was just entering seventh grade, and going through puberty without my mother to teach and guide me. Instead, my grandparents raised me. They did not know how to speak English or how to read or write. As a result, I turned to the streets for guidance. Living in the heart of the gang-infested barrio of Norwalk, California, this decision was a dangerous one.

Soon, I stopped attending school, joined a gang, and was experimenting with drugs. Within a year, I was trying PCP, LSD, and whatever else that took the pain away of losing my mother. In short, I rebelled. I had no parents and wanted no guidance, I did not have anyone to tell me what to do or how to live my life. I was angry with my mother for dying and leaving me alone. In turn, I took it out on everyone who tried to help me. Each passing year, I got worse. My drug use escalated and I began to have regular contact with the criminal justice system.

Even though I was a minor, I acted like an adult. I was part of a Mexican gang, and I lived by the rules of the street. At 15, I started seeing my child's father. I got pregnant for the first time at 16, but miscarried soon after. I gave birth to my son, my first child, when I was 20-years-old, then I had my daughter when I was 23. Their father and I never married, but we were together for 25 years. I loved being a stay-at-home mother to my son and daughter. I was off drugs and did everything I was supposed to be doing, living life on life terms, which meant being the best mother for my kids and being the best domestic partner for my kids' father who provided for us and putting my past behind me. Yet I was the victim of domestic violence, a fact that I hid from family and friends. My child's father was an alcoholic and sometimes he would hit me until I ended up in the hospital.

At the age of 34, I was diagnosed with cervical cancer and was told I was not going to live. I made peace with it. But soon thereafter, I went into remission. That is when I realized that I was addicted to pain medication. My painkiller addiction ultimately led me to methamphetamine, a drug that got me out of bed in the morning and helped me have normal days and lead a

mostly productive life. But the drug was so addictive that I left my home of 19 years and a 25 year relationship with my children's father to live on the streets. That was my low point. At that time, I was living in a riverbed under a freeway bridge and doing crimes to support my drug habit. I knew this lifestyle was putting my life in danger, but I didn't care; my drug habit was the only thing that was important to me. Even a brutal rape and beating did not stop me from doing drugs.

When my lifestyle finally caught up to me, I was sent to prison for almost two years. In October 2009, I was released to a drug rehabilitation program and was given six months to figure out what to do with my future. Looking to begin a new and better chapter in my life, I registered for classes at a community college. Fresh out of prison, I knew nothing about college. To start, I had no concept of a "major." I was not even sure why I wanted to pursue an education. I never thought, that with my background, I would be accepted in an academic setting or that I would be able to secure employment after I completed my degree. Yet, despite these questions and concerns, I knew that I had to learn how to succeed at life, and education seemed like a good place to start.

When I took my first administrative justice class, not only did I understand what I was being taught, I got my first "A" ever in my life! What a feeling! It was like a tall refreshing glass of cold water – sweet in its own way and invigorating. That is when I knew I wanted more of that same feeling. I felt empowered then to reach out to my professor at the time and let him know that I was an ex-felon. I did and asked him, will I be able to work in the criminal justice field with a felony? He said, "of course!" Those two words gave me more hope and a better high than all the drugs in the world. It gave me a sense of accomplishment, which was a feeling I have never felt before. Eventually, I graduated from community college with honors and an Associate's Degree. With that degree came a sense of accomplishment and a new sense of direction. I realized, for the first time in my life, that I was worth something.

Since then, other professors and students have encouraged and supported me, helping me to achieve all that I want in life, such as my professor, Dr. James M. Binnall. After transferring to California State University, Long Beach, I had the privilege of meeting Dr. Binnall, who is a formerly incarcerated person. Dr. Binnall introduced me to other students who were formerly incarcerated, and encouraged us to start an organization for those who have been impacted by the criminal justice system. Now, a year later, I am one of the founders of Rising Scholars, an organization for formerly incarcerated students in higher education. Since creating this organization, doors are opening for me. I have gotten the chance to tell my story at a number of different conferences all over the country. We are building the prison to college pipeline and helping those who are getting released to also pursue higher education.

Since graduating with my bachelor's in May 2018, I was accepted into the Social Work graduate program at California State University, Long Beach. With my master's degree, I want to help build a pathway for the formerly incarcerated that leads each of them from prison to college. I want to share with them all of the knowledge I have acquired, about how to navigate reentry obstacles. In particular, I want to connect returning citizens to resources that can help them succeed; resources I had to discover for myself. I know that getting an education is why I am succeeding in life for the first time. Today, I am happy and excited for the future. That is a new feeling for me, and one that I hope I can give to others. If I can be an example to others, and show them that it is never too late to start a new, better life, then I have accomplished my goal.

Adrian Vasquez (Co-Founder)

My name is Adrian Vasquez. I am 43 years old and live in Carson, California. I am the oldest of three brothers. I grew up in South Central Los Angeles, and at 19, I was arrested for homicide. I was convicted and sentenced to 16 years to life. In February 2014, I was released after serving 20 years in a California State Prison. Since my release, I have worked for the nonprofit organization, Anti-Recidivism Coalition, as an Intake Specialist and Job Developer. There, I help men and women who are affected by the criminal justice system by providing them support with housing, employment, mentoring, and counseling. I am also a graduate of California State University, Long Beach. My major was sociology. Through my work and my studies, I advocate for fair and just policies in the criminal justice system. My goal is to one day become a lawyer and work in the field of criminal justice.

I grew up in South Central Los Angeles in a gang-infested neighborhood during the late eighties and early nineties. My parents did their best to protect me from gang life and the negative influences exerted by my gang-affiliated friends. Along those lines, my parents enrolled me in a private Catholic school, which I attended from kindergarten to twelfth grade. Upon graduating from high school, I enrolled at California State University Long Beach, where I studied through my sophomore year. My goal was to complete a double major in Criminal Justice and Business Administration, and I was well on my way to achieving that goal.

Just when it seemed like my life was taking off, I made a decision that would change my world forever. Led to believe that another man had raped my then girlfriend, I, along with three of my friends, went to find the accused man and teach him a lesson. The situation soon became uncontrollable as my friends and I beat and ended up killing the accused rapist. Months later during my trial, I discovered that my former girlfriend was never raped and that she had had a consensual one-night stand with the man we killed. She lied about the truth to conceal her cheating. Finding out she lied, I felt anger,

disappointment, but most of all shame. I realized an innocent man lost his life for a false belief which brought anguish to my heart for his death. At the age of 19, I was sentenced to serve a 16-year to life sentence. Prison was a traumatic experience that drastically altered the course of my life.

For the first ten years of my prison sentence, I struggled. I acted out and had disciplinary issues. My behavior landed me in Administrative Segregation³ multiple times throughout those first ten years. The turning point in my life came after a visit from my mother. She told me she had been diagnosed with a malignant tumor and begged me to change my behavior so that I could be released while she was alive. "I want you to get out," she told me, "so I can hug you again before I die." The impact of her words hit home immediately. I wanted to make changes right away, and that was when I consciously decided I couldn't live like I had been anymore, but I did not know where to begin or who to ask for help.

I began searching for positive outlets available in prison, yet there were very few. I found myself struggling to find something that gave me hope and a sense of self-worth. Finally, I came across a correspondence college program called Coastline Community College in Old Folsom State Prison. In the beginning, I was very skeptical and not sure what I was undertaking. At the time, I was 28 years old and still involved in prison politics.⁴ I was in a mental tug of war with wanting to grant my mother's wishes and wanting to change, yet I did not want to look weak among my peers. I finally made the decision and enrolled in Coastline Community College in spring 2005 when the prison shot-caller⁵ for the Southerners⁶ told me, "you're too smart for this shit, go to school and go home to your mom."

I enrolled and took Counseling 101 and Astronomy. After three months of reading and taking courses, I found a sense of self-worth and empowerment. I discovered taking college courses kept me out of trouble. I found myself studying and reading in my cell, too busy to hang out on the prison yard and get caught up in prison politics. Prison guards began viewing me as more than "just a thug" and more as an individual attempting to better himself. In this way, education became my escape from the prison environment and a pathway to a new life. In 2012, while housed at R.J. Donovan Correctional Facility, I was the first inmate to achieve two Associate's degrees from Coastline Community College. I was commended, not only by the education department at the facility, but also by the Warden of the prison. I became a role model, proving to others that change is possible and that your past does not have to define you.

Finally, on October 24, 2013, after my fourth parole hearing, I was granted a parole date from the Board of Prison Terms. I was released from prison on February 25, 2014. The education I obtained in prison became instrumental for my pathway to a four-year university and transitioning back into society. It created a layer over my criminal background, and in part, shielded me from the stigma of being viewed as another parolee up to no good. I became

a student, not a parolee, and was able to grant my mother's wishes. I am now a free college student and I now use my past to help others. I am a founding member of the Rising Scholars student organization at California State University, Long Beach.

Higher education has allowed me, and others like me, to overcome the challenges of having a criminal background. No longer was I just another convicted individual with no future; instead, I am a person who can achieve success in life. The educational pathway has opened doors that were once locked. Immersed in education, I do not feel stigmatized any longer. I feel as though I have shed my criminal background and built a foundation to reach my potential. Instrumental to my success has been the mentoring I have received from those with similar life experiences.

Many formerly incarcerated people struggle in their first year of college or university. They experience what I call the "spot-light effect," which is the strong belief one will be singled out on campus or in class if others know they have been incarcerated. This is a real challenge, and I was one of those individuals. Yet, with the help of Rising Scholars and other peer mentorship networks, I no longer feel that spotlight. Who better to guide and uplift, but those who have walked – to a point – in my shoes? This is what a diverse and inclusive educational experience has given me, the opportunity to connect with people like myself who can understand my experiences and guide me. Overall, education gave me a pathway to escape the harsh realities of a criminal background, and at the same time provided me new and exciting opportunities.

Joe Louis Hernandez (Co-Founder)

I am Joe Louis Hernandez, and I am a graduate student at California State University, Long Beach, where I am working towards my Master of Science in Counseling, with an emphasis in student development in higher education. I am also a Success Coach for formerly incarcerated students at Rio Hondo Community College. In a prior life, I was a gang member, a drug addict, and an inmate.

As I sat in my first college class, these were my thoughts:

Damn, I don't belong here. How am I gonna make it in college when I didn't even go to high school. I have so much I must do before I am even able to graduate from Mt. San Antonio College, this is never happening for me, I should just give it up. Even if I do graduate, who is going to give me a good job; I have felonies and a rap sheet. Nobody is going to hire me for a good job. Why even try?

I had just begun my journey away from addiction and towards education. I was still not sure it would pay off. I doubted everything, and my professor

had not even reviewed the syllabus! This wasn't the first time that I attended college. The first time I dropped out. I hoped this time would be different. Still, I was unsure. Ultimately, my fears were unfounded. That day I had no idea that this time, education would change my life.

What was different this time? This time I had direction and drive, something that I had never had before. This time I began school with a hustler's mentality, the same mentality I had back in the streets. I got on and stayed on my "grind."⁷⁷ My cousin told me to apply to all the programs on campus, and to look for help. I took her advice, and applied to Extended Opportunity Programs and Services, and to the school's Trio Program Aces. I was admitted to both. These opportunities helped me build a foundation on which I could begin to rebuild my life.

It was during this time that I met my mentor, Diana Felix. She believed in me, and what I could achieve with an education. While I was still in the remedial English classes, she was already talking to me about writing a thesis and going to graduate school. I had never considered either. To be honest, I didn't even think that I was going to make it through community college. But, because she believed in me, I followed her direction. I obeyed her like I was back in the 'hood, and whatever my big homies told me to do, I did. Before that, I took "penitentiary chances,"⁷⁸ so why would I not try to take chances that could lead to new life?

Still, some days, in the back of my mind, I had a negative voice that would say, "you're not going to make it, you don't belong here." Even though I felt this way, I pushed on and kept at it. I remember being scared and thinking, "shit, why am I scared, I have been locked up with killers, and shot at multiple times." Nonetheless, nothing scared me more than going to college and taking college algebra, or doing statistics. But, just like when I was on the streets, I looked to the homies for back up. So, I went to the tutoring centers, and I got help from the tutors for my programs. Ultimately, I passed Statistics, earning an A. During my time at Mt. San Antonio College, I grinded and put in the work and was able to finish my degree within two years. At that point, I applied to transfer with an Associate's Degree to Social and Behavioral Sciences.

Succeeding at the community college level gave me confidence. With that confidence, I moved on to California State University, Los Angeles (CSU-LA). For me, this was a surreal experience. I remember previously living just a few miles from this university. Ironically, while in high school, I visited this same university for a gang prevention program at which they told us we too could attend college. I remember thinking to myself, "who wants to go to school, I am only here 'cause I didn't have to go to school today?"

Ultimately, the guy at my gang prevention program was right, I could go to college. He had planted a seed. During my time at CSU-LA, I made the decision to pursue a career as a community college counselor. I wanted to help people that had been in situations similar to my own. Specifically,

I wanted to help people who have histories of incarceration and feel like they don't belong on a college campus. I want to be there to welcome them and to help them to feel like they are accepted. So, when I was done with my degree at CSU-LA, I began to apply to graduate programs. California State University, Long Beach (CSU-LB) accepted me and helped me move one step closer to my goal.

At the start of my studies at CSU-LB, I still doubted myself. One particularly dark day, early on, I ran in to a friend – Adrian Vasquez – who told me about Professor Binnall, who had been incarcerated. He then told me of all the social movements and efforts going on in California focused on aiding former offenders reenter society. As we talked that day, Adrian and I decided that we should pursue the formation of a student organization at CSU-LB, an organization that would help formerly incarcerated students. So, with the help of other formerly incarcerated students, Professor Binnall, and other allies, we formed Rising Scholars.

Rising Scholars is now part of a movement that has taken hold in California. Across the state, a union of students who have been incarcerated has formed. It has been this work and this movement that has helped me redefine myself in the context of higher education. At one time, I thought that I was hopeless because of my criminal past, and today I see value in that past. My value, in part, lies in how I am able to utilize my past experiences to help myself and others achieve their educational goals. I do not look at those dark times in my life as periods of failure, but instead I now see them as lessons that have taught me how to stay hungry and to keep hustling for good.

My past experiences taught me valuable lessons. For instance, as a Gangster, I learned that I was willing to do anything to get ahead. I now apply that mentality to my educational pursuits and I have shared that mentality with others. I have begun to mentor and to use my voice to help create spaces for those that are afraid of being stigmatized. I feel that with my voice, I can help to change the narrative about incarceration and the formerly incarcerated. In my opinion, we need to assist one another, not just through words, but also with actions. Growing up, all I wanted to be was a “GEE,” which is a Gangster. Today I am still a “GEE” – I am a college graduate and a graduate student, and I like the way my world has changed.

Conclusion

Taken together, the experiences of the Rising Scholars' Founders suggest that education initially served as a means of shedding an antisocial, criminal identity. Still, woven through each of their stories is a sense of doubt that plagued their early entry into higher learning. This doubt, while potentially detrimental to their success, seemingly fueled their desire to alter their lives in positive ways. As each of the Rising Scholar Founders progressed on their own educational journey, they began to build new identities, referring to but

not essentializing their criminal pasts. In short, the Rising Scholar Founders “became” students, drawing on their own deviant, often tragic backgrounds, as tools with which to build new pro-social identities.

Though ostensibly logical and linear, the reformation of the Rising Scholar Founders at CSU-LB was anything but straightforward. As they note, setbacks were part of their journey. To overcome these setbacks, the Founders, and myself, relied on the lessons we learned as gangsters, criminals, and then convicts. As a group, we have all navigated experiences – crime, incarceration, and reentry – that require tenacity and skill. Those same qualities helped all of us excel in higher education.

As the advisor to Rising Scholars, I have seen the Rising Scholar Founders struggle. These struggles often stem from a desire to succeed now, while failing to appropriately appreciate the process. For those who have been incarcerated, who have lost years of our lives, the need for immediate gratification is understandable. We are “behind.” Our life cohort moved on without us while we were addicted, deviant, or incarcerated. We must now try and catch up. My job, as faculty advisor, is to harness students’ enthusiasm while tempering their expectations, and reminding them, always, that our members are exceptional students, not exceptional students who were once incarcerated.

The value of Rising Scholars is the community and the commonality of experience within that community of students. As formerly incarcerated and returning citizens, we, who are now students, faculty, and allies, speak the same language and understand the frustrations and self-doubt felt when faced with setbacks. This bond creates a collective sense of empathy and accountability. With both at the ready, the group is better positioned to confront and overcome obstacles unique to returning citizens. For our members, Rising Scholars is a resource that provides not only instrumental assistance and emotional support, but also an achievable model. We draw inspiration from one another without begrudging individual successes. In this way, Rising Scholars hold one another to a standard that is realistic and attainable, so long as we work together.

In my own experience, I returned to education to change my life story. It “worked” because I had many teachers and mentors who offered assistance. Rising Scholars does the same for students – it is a group that brings together the vast assets and skills of the returning community. For me, the collective knowledge of our group is astounding. The encyclopedic knowledge of resources and opportunities our members possess amazes. When I left prison and began my own educational journey, I had to hope that I would find help. Ultimately, I did. As the Faculty Advisor to Rising Scholars, my goal has always been to remove the uncertainty from our members’ experiences; Rising Scholars has done just that.

As I noted in the introduction, the stories of the Rising Scholars founding members at CSU-LB are not unique. Every day, young men and women

are sentenced to serve prison sentences that can effectively end their hopes of ever achieving their goals and dreams, and most of them return to society at some point. An inclusive educational experience offers these men and women an opportunity to excel, contribute, and alter their lives while helping other former offenders chase their own goals. Through their contributions to this chapter, the founding members of Rising Scholars have taken the brave step of sharing their pasts, presents, and future goals with the world. For that, they ought to be commended; too often, formerly incarcerated people are “data” to be analyzed and published. In this context, the formerly incarcerated, remarkable men and women, get to critically analyze their own lives and experiences, and offer a favorable direction for new types of research on a population of which I am a part.

Notes

1. Maruna (2001) and Maruna et al. (2004) note that scholars describe the “delabeling process” using a host of monikers including: “certification process” or “destigmatization process” (Meisenhelder 1977, 1982), “elevation ceremony” (Lofland, 1969), and “integration ceremony” (Braithwaite & Mugford, 1994).
2. “Professional ex” (Brown, 1991) and “wounded healer” (White, 2000) paradigms refer to situations in which someone afflicted with an infirmity (addiction, formerly incarcerated, etc.) takes on the role of helping others with that same affliction.
3. “Administrative Segregation” refers to a housing unit inside of a correctional institution where an inmate is housed in solitary confinement because of a disciplinary infraction or because of a safety concern.
4. “Prison Politics” refers to the manner in which inmates negotiate the unwritten rules of prison.
5. “Shot-Caller” refers to a high-ranking, influential member of a gang.
6. “Southerners” refers to the classification of an inmate who is geographically from southern California.
7. “Grind” refers to a person’s willingness to work hard and remain dedicated to their pursuits.
8. “Penitentiary chances” is an expression which means taking risks that could result in a prison sentence.

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