Greetings Success Stories Program Alumni

Your Success Stories community has been making moves. Those of us who are just coming home are linking up with those of us who have been home for a couple of years, and that connection is dynamic. The past sees the future, and the future remembers the past, and both are humbled by the exchange. In this issue we introduce you to two humble titans who are living examples of why your attitudes and actions matter now, no matter where you’re currently located. Both of these men helped to create the Success Stories Program while they were incarcerated, never imagining that it would grow beyond the walls of the prison they were held in. Their past reveals that they originated in unremarkable yet familiar circumstances. However, their choices in response to these circumstances, and the paths those choices would create, uncover a noteworthy timeline that demonstrates the immense and contradictory worlds we have the power to bring about.

PROGRAMMING UPDATES

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

In the past few months, we’ve been expanding into new spaces, including Homeboy Industries, and University Heights Middle School, where we’re delivering programming and developing our community even further.

We’ve also partnered with Clothes the Deal, a community organization whose mission is to provide low-income men, women, at-risk youth, and U.S. Veterans with professional business attire in order to empower them when reaching for employment, self-sufficiency, and economic independence. The good folks there are helping to get our alumni fresh, high-end, professional attire for absolutely nothing out-of-pocket. We believe that integrity is “in you” and not “on you,” but that doesn’t mean we can’t appreciate the way we feel inside of a fresh suit. We want you to have everything you need in order to push towards your goals, and so we’ve found a company that prides itself in reaching goals in style. We make it easy for you by setting up appointments individually or collectively, making it a time to connect and network as well as learn how to tie a tie. Honestly, why not?

Left: Graham Finochio pictured with Mario Martinez at a recent Clothes the Deal event, where they both were given these perfect suits.

Below (from left to right, top to bottom row): Trinidad Flores, Ricky Goodwin, Johnny Howe, Graham Finochio, Hugo Gonzalez, Mario Martinez, and Chris Johnson take a group photo outside of the Clothes the Deal office.
ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

RAMIRO VALENCIA

Born and raised by a single mother in a bad part of the San Fernando Valley, Ramiro Valencia chose a life that forced wisdom to come the hard way. As a youth, he “ran the streets, doing whatever I had to do like everyone else.”

In and out of jail, Ramiro never had a job. During a lengthy stint, he finally got tired of the outcomes he was receiving in life and decided to try something new. He enrolled in classes and self-help groups, and started having different conversations — many of which were influenced by what he was exposed to in Success Stories. Ramiro got clear about his goals and staying committed to them when old habits wanted to derail him.

Ramiro was also influenced by his brother, a truck driver, and decided to pursue a similar career. Following his release, Ramiro enrolled in truck driving school, got his license, and found a job. But he didn’t stop there.

Following his release, Ramiro enrolled in truck driving school, got his license, and found a job. But he didn’t stop there. He saved, studied, watched YouTube, and worked out a deal to acquire his own truck. Now his momentum is built and his past way of seeing the world is no longer a temptation. **His personal success is evident; not in the occupation he has, or the money he is making, but in the way he has built his integrity.** He knows where he’s going, and that clarity nudges him in the right direction when he needs it most.

YOUR PARTNERSHIP

Our Alumni Network has been created, for you and by you, to continue building the communities we create during the 12-weeks of Success Stories Program.

If there are particular topics you’re interested in reading about here, works you’d like to contribute, or other recommendations — please write to us at: 1175 East Baker Street E-19  Costa Mesa, California 92626
If you have ever had the opportunity to meet Hugo, you would be quite familiar with his immense presence. Standing at a little over five feet, Hugo is the largest person in the room. His personality and energy fill every space around him and the people he engages with; it is truly awesome to behold.

You wouldn't have placed a bet on this particular outcome had you witnessed his upbringing. Hugo was born with cerebral palsy to a mother that was 17 years old. He was subsequently raised, along with his eight siblings, by his maternal grandmother and grandfather in Long Beach, California. Due to his condition, Hugo felt a deep need to be recognized as a powerful person by those around him; in fact, it was a cousin whom he looked up to who would instill in him the value of receiving 'respect over pity.' As a teenager, Hugo went on to buy into the mainstream ideas of what it meant to be a young Latino man living in Long Beach, and a major element in this involved portraying a passion for violence. This passion would ultimately lead to him receiving a life-sentence at the age of 17.

Thankfully, the story doesn’t end there. In prison, Hugo educated himself formally and informally, earning an associate’s degree and developing a deep level of self-awareness. He wasn’t an angel, but this commitment to being honest with himself, along with the accumulation of cognitive-behavioral techniques, enabled him to co-create the original Success Stories Program founded in the Correctional Training Facility in Soledad, California.

In creating this program, he unwittingly created an inspiring future for himself. His self-help efforts caught the attention of the Governor of California, as well as other influential people, and that attention not only led to his early release from prison, but fueled his present life – providing more opportunities than he could ever imagine. The Success Stories Program that he helped to create is now a thriving nonprofit organization that is currently expanding into other states and countries. And as the Alumni Coordinator of this organization, Hugo is once again choosing a way of living that helps to build people rather than destroy them. His character has caused him to be in demand in many ways, including by California senators and congressmen. He has been sought out to provide insight and perspective to the staff of the President of the United States. He has built a close and trusting relationship with his son. His phone book holds the numbers to many recognizable people – and all of this is the byproduct of him being honest with himself and getting clear on what is most important to him. In all of his interactions with others, Hugo simply encourages this same strategy for success; but ultimately, it’s his actions that have spoken much louder than his words.
In ancient times, strawberries were used to treat depression. Early European folklore offered that if two people ate a strawberry together, they would fall in love. Both of these concepts are fitting when related to Roy, because anyone that knows him would tell you that depression cannot exist in his company, nor could the idea of love be left unspoken. What's more is that Roy hails from the strawberry capital of the United States, Santa Maria, California, and the notions of depression and love have been powerful themes, though evolved, throughout his life.

We had the honor of interviewing Roy just weeks after he returned home, still glowing with a dream freshly realized. Humble as ever, he has a palpable energy that gravitates towards the service of others; and that energy was on full display as he opened up about his past and present. "I met my dad in federal prison," is how he begins his narrative, shortly after he relates that he was born in Santa Maria. He relates that the criminal and gang culture "was a normal part of my family growing up," and he gravitated towards it early on because of the instant gratification he got from that lifestyle. He relates the common pleasures we all can relate to directly or indirectly — deeply indulging in drugs, sex, aggression, and easy money. These pursuits had a natural consequence of either prison or death, sometimes both, and Roy rolled the dice and chose life in prison, via the murder of another young man like himself. Roy recalls, "I was willing to live, die, kill, or spend the rest of my life in prison for the gang — for the image and the identity I had created." He continues, saying that it was all about his ego and this box he had created around himself, that he had invested virtually all of his energy into this person that was this gang member, into this person that was vicious and reckless and down for whatever. He realizes now, though, that he was not a monster. Even though he was committing monstrous acts and betraying his heart, his heart over time began to betray him. He couldn't sleep at night, he was tossing and turning. During the day, to alleviate the troubles within him, he would drink, smoke, and make money selling drugs. He told himself that this was "survival by any means necessary" and this philosophy was a result of the lens with which he saw the world and ultimately himself. He believed that this was a dark place and that the end justifies the means in any situation.

As mentioned, Roy would be sentenced to life in prison for murder. Within a few days of receiving his sentence, the prison chaplain would make his way to his cell, informing him that his father had taken his own life. Until this very day, almost 14 years later, guilt holds tight to him like skin; he is still wrestling with it. This event, among others, crystallized some of his authentic values; and when he was finally introduced to Success Stories in 2015, he quickly filled his top 5 with family. Looking at those names, and owning his capacity to choose his path towards honoring what was important to him, brought him to the realization that he needed to make considerable changes in his thoughts and behavior.

That choice to travel the narrow and obstacle-filled path has had its rewards. Taking responsibility for achieving what’s most important to him has given Roy another kind of freedom — the freedom to define himself, rather than be defined by others. He would call this self-agency — the willingness to represent one’s own authentic interests with diligent effort. This is the work he has been committed to over the past six years; working on getting to know himself, and then representing that self in whatever situation he may be involved in. This work was shown in the documentary The Feminist On Cell Block Y.