



The
Welcome Home
Project

Stories of inspiration and hope — how 20 formerly incarcerated men & women transformed their lives



About the Welcome Home Project

The Welcome Home Project is a collection of stories and photographs of 20 formerly incarcerated men and women who were able to turn their lives around. The project hopes to provide positive role models to people being released from prison, and to challenge the notion that people involved in crime cannot or will not change. Their stories are testimony to the power of resilience and determination in the face of the stigma and barriers that most of the formerly incarcerated face.

Some of the people who shared their stories came from two-parent, middle-class families, and some came from families impacted by crime and addiction for generations. Some came from families traumatized by domestic violence, and some were sexually molested as children. Although addiction to drugs often led to their criminal behavior, most of them had little or no access to drug treatment while in prison.

When they were released, some had little more than the \$200 they were given at the prison gates. Many returned to neighborhoods already impacted by poverty and crime, and they all faced barriers in employment, housing, and government assistance that contributed to the revolving door back to prison.

It was only when the Welcome Home participants were ready *and* adequate support was available through addiction and recovery programs, job training, and housing assistance that they were able to begin the hard work needed to reclaim their lives from the effects of crime and incarceration.

In California 65% of those leaving prison return within three years. This revolving prison door affects whole communities, especially communities of color, where many families have a close relative that has been in prison. Nine percent of California's children have a parent involved in the criminal justice system. The social costs of recidivism are immeasurable.

"You've got to know that your life is worth saving," says Raynetta Lewis, who spent 22 years in and out of prison. We need to welcome people home with the resources and support they need in order to change, because their lives and our communities are worth saving.

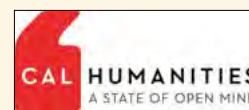
— Micky Duxbury, MFT
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About the Photographer

Ruth Morgan is a critically acclaimed photographer whose work has been exhibited nationally and internationally. Her exhibit *Maximum Security*, documented conditions inside San Quentin Prison and led to reforms in the California prison system. Her exhibits include: *Alice and Jack*, *Harlem IS*, *Record Breakers*, *Ohlone Elders and Youth Speak*, and *We're Still Here*, an upcoming photo documentary about the Piqua Shawnee in Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky. Ms. Morgan has received grants and awards from the Creative Work Fund, San Francisco Arts Commission, the San Francisco Foundation, and the California Arts Council.

Acknowledgments

My life has been enriched by meeting the participants in the Welcome Home Project. I celebrate them all for the courage it took to share their stories. The Welcome Home Project is a program of Community Works West, an Oakland, CA nonprofit that serves the needs of the incarcerated and their families. I am deeply thankful to Ruth Morgan, the Executive Director, who fully supported this project. Her talents as a photographer brought these stories to life.



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Welcome Home!

The people in this booklet shared their stories because they want to support YOU! They want to welcome you home to a life that does not lead you back to jail or prison.

Many have walked the same path you have walked. Most spent between 5 and 20 years involved in criminal activities — most of which included drug dealing, addiction, and prostitution. They tried to change their lives many times before they were successful. As Raynetta Lewis said, “When I was in the backseat of the police car I’d say, ‘God help me. I promise I won’t do this no more,’ but as soon as I got out, I’d forget those words.”

Many got caught in a revolving door going back and forth to jail and prison. “Probation and parole are not easy,” said Keith Warren. “You go through a lot of red tape and some days are going to try you, but if you are willing to change your mindset, you can avoid going back to prison.”

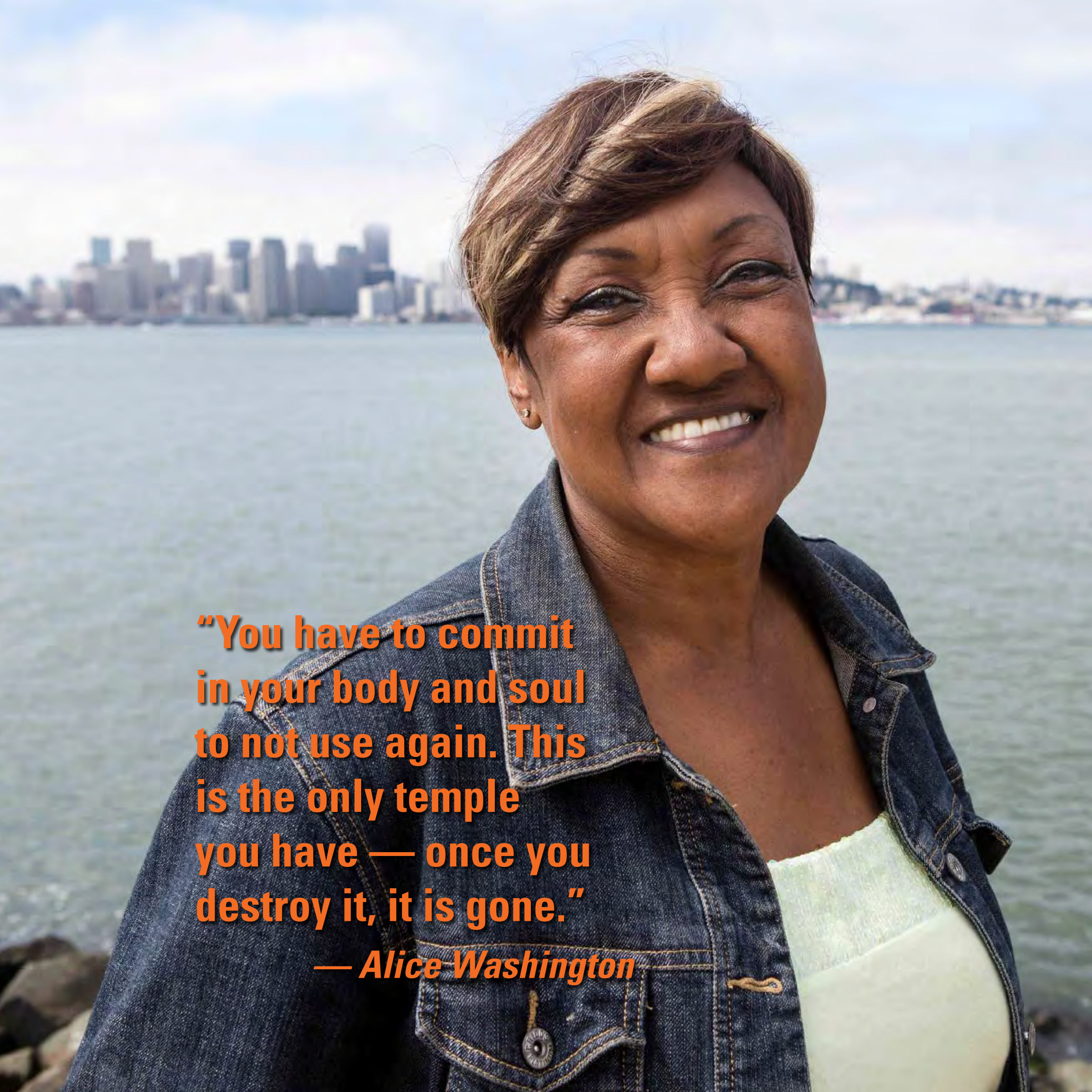
Change is not easy and no one did it alone. Many turned to support networks of family, friends, and

places of worship. Whether you need job training or employment, drug treatment or housing, there are re-entry programs to help you succeed. Finding jobs and housing can be especially difficult, but as Stephanie Viscaino said, “Living in the life is so much harder.”

Most of the people didn’t like what crime was doing to themselves and their families and they were ready to change. “When I was in prison I didn’t think I was hurting anybody else, but I started to realize the harm I had caused my family and my kids,” said Darryl Johnson. “I’ll never do anything again that takes me away from the people I love.”

No matter how many obstacles they faced, each person realized that they had to make a decision to live a life free from crime. “I finally got tired of the downward spiral to jails and institutions,” said Nichole Pettway. “Even thinking about crime poisons you,” said Yema Lee. “It poisons you on the inside and it poisons your spirit. I am thankful that I’m free now.”

Welcome Home to the possibility of freedom!



**“You have to commit
in your body and soul
to not use again. This
is the only temple
you have — once you
destroy it, it is gone.”**

— *Alice Washington*

Alice Washington, age 60, has a Drug and Alcohol Counseling Certificate and a BA in Psychology, and she is working on her Master's Degree as a family therapist. Involved in crime between the ages of 26-36, she was in and out of county jail and served five years in Valley State Prison.

What got me into the life was a relationship with a guy who told me to try some crack and I got hooked.

He lost his business, so we got into crime to make sure we had crack. I was in and out of jail for almost 10 years and I burned so many bridges that my mom was done with me. She told me, 'I got your name in the prayer box at church,' and I would say, 'Take my name out of there. Nobody needs to pray for *me*.'

My husband was abusive and beat me when I didn't want to do drugs anymore. I was 35 years old and pregnant and I decided I didn't want a crack baby. My daughter was born clean, but then I got back on crack again. Finally, I got into a 30-day program and the first night I got out, my husband was smoking crack. The next morning I packed up our stuff and I said, 'I'm leaving — I'm done.'

I moved to San Francisco and found a treatment program that took my daughter and I. (I have been clean since she was three years old — that's 23 years!) The Probation Department in Fresno knew I was in a treatment program in San Francisco, but they wanted me to report back to Fresno when I got out. My luck was so bad with the law that every time I showed up at Probation I went to jail, so I just didn't trust what would happen. I decided not to go back to Fresno and they put a warrant out for me.

I was being a good parent — I was not using and I had a job at the homeless shelter we were living in. I helped my daughter with her speech for the Martin Luther King Day holiday at her kindergarten, but I sat through the whole play, and my daughter never came out. So I asked the principal, 'Where is my daughter at?' When I called the number that the principal gave me, the lady said, 'Your daughter is at SF General — we will come to pick you up.'

An unmarked car drove up and I got into the back seat. It wasn't until I saw a card on the floor that said *SF Police Department* that I knew what was happening. They took me to SF General to say good-bye to my daughter before sending me to Valley State Prison for five years for my parole violation. My mother moved to


Chowchilla just to make it possible for my daughter to grow up close to me. They came to see me every Friday, Saturday and Sunday for five years.

Every day I was inside, I thanked the Lord because my husband would never put his hands on me again and I knew I would never use again. I got closer in my relationship with God and said, 'You bring me through this one, you don't never need to worry about me coming back.'

You gotta look at what a life of drugs and crime and being in and out of jail has done to you and your family. My daughter remembered being three years old and learning how to open a can and put the food in the microwave so she could have something to eat, while I was in the living room smoking crack. She felt like I held her prisoner. I would lock her in the bedroom and tell her to knock on the door when she needed to get out.

I was clean, but it wasn't until I addressed the domestic violence that I was finally healed. I will never be in a situation again where I will let myself be abused. I love myself today. You have to commit in your body and soul to not use again. **You gotta say that no matter what, ain't nothing gonna make you do this again. This is the only temple you have — once you destroy it, it is gone. ■**





“I started to cry when I got my driver’s license because I felt like I was finally part of society. I never felt a part of anything other than a gang, but now I wanted to be somebody.”

— Javier Jimenez

Javier Jimenez, age 36, is a case manager for the City of Oakland's Operation Ceasefire, that seeks to reduce gun violence and homicides. He was in the criminal justice system from ages 12 to 32, serving a total of seven years in California State Prisons and Santa Rita Jail.

I come from a long line of addicts and a family that was in and out of jail. My father was an alcoholic who was drunk all the time. My mother tried to hold the family together, but she was an addict too. I wanted to be like my older brother, who was getting high and doing crime.

I got a girl pregnant when I was 17 and when she told me, I said, 'What are you going to do about it? I got prison to go to.' My whole mindset was that I was going to prison like everybody else I knew. I abandoned my daughter. I was using the day she was born.

On my 18th birthday, I went to Santa Rita for the first time. I was shocked when I first walked in; it looked like a row of men in dog kennels. But every time I got out, I'd go back to drugs and crime. When I was 19, I got busted for stealing a car and did four years.

Looking back, I can see that I was hitting bottom every single day and I didn't even know it. I've been shot; I've been stabbed; guys with baseball bats have jumped me; I've been in psych wards and in prison six times. When my brother got clean, he asked me to go to Narcotics Anonymous meetings with him, but I wasn't ready. He took me to the hospital when I got stabbed, but he told me that all he could do was pray for me; I had to do the rest.

The next time I got out, I stole a car and had another high-speed chase with the cops and almost hit some kids in a crosswalk. I got out of the car and was running when they caught me. I raised my hands in the air and they told me to get on the ground. That is when I had an epiphany: I knew that they could kill me and would be justified in doing it.

I was lost. I was physically, spiritually, and emotionally bankrupt. I had a hole inside of me that I tried to fill with girls and cars and drugs, but nothing filled that hole — it just kept getting bigger. I knew that if I got high again I could kill somebody and spend the rest of my life in prison.

After they gave me eight years, I went back to my cell and prayed. I said, 'Show me another way to live.' After serving seven months, I told the judge, 'Every time I go back to prison I come out worse. I need help. Let

me parole to a treatment program.' The judge looked me in the eye and said, 'Nobody ever asks me for help. I am going to give it to you, but if I ever find you back here you'll go to prison for five years.'

They sent me to Seventh Step, a residential treatment program that helped get my addiction under wraps. I started to cry when I got my driver's license because I felt like I was finally part of society. I'd never felt a part of anything other than a gang, but now I wanted to be somebody who my daughter could look up to.

I was doing so well at Seventh Step that they hired me. Then I got involved in Measure Y's Street Outreach, a program whose goal is to reduce violence in Oakland. I became a youth intervention specialist at Outreach, and am currently working on becoming a certified addiction specialist. I am also a case manager at Operation Ceasefire, where I work with high-risk young adults to reduce violence.

You can heal the broken relationships with your family by showing them that you have changed. I met my wife at an AA meeting. I raised her kids and we adopted another child who would have been lost in the system. I reconciled with my daughter. **I have a circle of people that I am clean with, people who have moved on with their lives. If I could change this much, you can too. ■**



**“You walk around
with this luggage
and you want a new
life, but you keep
carrying this luggage
with you. You’ve got
to let it go!”**

— Angelica Pina



Angelica Pina, age 36, is pursuing her Bachelor's Degree in accounting at California State University, East Bay. She was last released from jail in 2005, after 10 years of involvement with drugs and crime.

Looking at me today, you would never think that I spent time in jail or prison. I did not come from a line of addicts or grow up in a dysfunctional family. I grew up in Oakland in a close family and was in a Catholic school until eighth grade. Then we moved to Pittsburg, CA and it was a big shock when I started public high school.

I got pregnant when I was 16. When my mother found out she told me that my father would disown me, so I enrolled in a program where I could go to school and work. When I finally told him, he told me that I had to leave my family home.

The baby's father was abusive and beat me, so I was a scared 16 year-old with a newborn. I found another guy who I thought was going to save me and I got pregnant again. The father of my first child was in and out of jail. When he found out that I was eight months pregnant with another man's child, he beat me very badly. When I woke up in the hospital, my son was already two days old. The beating was so bad that I missed my son's birth.

I tried to get back on my feet and started community college, but I got involved with somebody else and had a third child. When I was 24, I got turned onto cocaine and got involved with the drug dealer. When he went to jail, he asked me to help him deal drugs. I had worked so hard from the time I was 16, that having all this money without working was very seductive.

I ended up getting totally hooked on speed and things spiraled out of control. My house was raided and I was arrested for drug trafficking. I got bailed out, but I was so hooked that I was rearrested within a month and got an 18-month sentence to Valley State Prison.

When I got out, someone in Narcotics Anonymous referred me to a program that had one bed open that same day and I drove straight there. I eventually moved into a Sober Living Environment and stayed there for two and a half years while I went to DUI classes and Narcotic Anonymous.

I got my first job while I was in recovery at Target because they were willing to hire people that had felonies. Then I worked for 24 Hour Fitness and worked myself up to assistant manager, then operations manager, then district manager. When I was promoted to club manager, I had to have a background check because I would be overseeing their Kids' Club. None of the crimes I did had anything to do with kids, but because of my felonies, they had to let me go — after five and a half years!

I eventually reclaimed guardianship of my three children who had been living with my parents. My six-year-old daughter was the first to return home. My oldest son took it the hardest because I had been in and out of his life from ages 7-13. When I graduated from Heald College he hugged me and told me he was proud of me. I felt like he had forgiven me.

There have been times when I wanted to run away and escape. My daughter got really sick and had to have brain surgery, but I chose not to use, **I chose not to get drunk, I chose to deal with life and I prayed a lot. ■**





“I’m not going to lie to anybody — probation and parole are not easy. You’ve got to depend on something bigger than yourself to get through this.”

— Keith Warren

Keith Warren, age 42, attended Bayview Barber College and is currently working at a barbershop in downtown Oakland. First arrested when he was 21, Keith spent six years in and out of Santa Rita Jail and three years in California State Prisons.

I was not born into crime. I had very decent parents and grew up in the church in Oakland. I was a good worker. But in my mid-twenties, I saw fast money on the streets and it was alluring. I was in and out of crime for 10 years, spent time in county jail and served almost three years in prison. I was paroled in 2005 and my mind was set that I was never going back to prison. That was the breakthrough for me: finally taking responsibility for the situation I was in, being accountable.

I wanted to better myself so I started working on my physical man, my spiritual man, and my educated man. If I wanted to stay out, I needed to be conscious of what I surrounded myself with. Many people on the inside entertained themselves playing dominoes, but I started reading self-help books and the Bible.

My family's support had a lot to do with how I survived. Some people don't have someone they can call when they're in trouble, but I had a family who cared about me and wanted to see me succeed. They didn't say 'he's in jail — he's bad.' They said that I made a mistake, but that I could grow from that mistake. They never gave up on me.

You don't just do what you want to do in prison: you go to sleep when they want you to; you dress how they want you to; you go to the bathroom when they let you. It all depends on what the one person who has the keys says. I knew it was no way for a man to live, so I started to make decisions about how I wanted my life to be different.

I'm not going to lie to anybody — probation and parole are not easy. You go through a lot of red tape when you are on probation or parole. Some days are going to try you, but if you have faith, it is like a rubber band and can be stretched. You've got to depend on something bigger than yourself to get through it.

I felt like God didn't give up on me so I couldn't give up on myself. I believe everybody knows God whether they want to admit it or not. Every time there is something catastrophic, every time there is a car accident, every time somebody goes to the hospital, the first person they call on is God.

I am not saying you have to be spiritual to change your life, but you've got to change your mindset. It's not normal to walk around with guns; it's not normal to be walking down the street with bottles and pills. Going to a funeral every week for one of your friends is not normal.

My heart goes out to you if you are not willing to change your mindset, because sooner or later, you will be going back to prison. Every day in front of this barber shop, I see buses going back and forth between jail and the courtroom and I just pray for the people in those buses. When you are tired of being sick and tired, you will stop — whether it's your addiction to drugs or your addiction to committing robberies.

In parts of Oakland, there is a liquor store on every corner. That's not right. It tears down communities and it tears down families. In the suburbs, it's miles before you find a liquor store. There is a bigger picture going on here that's bigger than any individual. It needs to change. We have to reevaluate what we are doing because our youth are our future. **Now is the time for us to grow and develop as a people, not to kill one another. It is time for us to lift each other up. ■**





“When big ships need to change course, you don’t just turn the wheel and get back on course. You need a tugboat for assistance.”

— Kevin Sykes

Kevin Sykes, age 41, is a truck driver for Waste Management of Alameda County and he facilitates Narcotics Anonymous groups at the San Francisco County Jail. He spent over 15 years in county jails and California State Prisons.

My family looked okay from the outside. My dad was a loving father, but he struggled with alcoholism and my parents ended up getting divorced. That's when I started hanging out with high school dropouts. By age 14, I was using cocaine.

I lived a double life in high school. I had college-level classes, but after school I was stealing cars and I finally got arrested at school. When I walked out of the principal's office in hand cuffs, there was no hiding it anymore. I got into a heavier drug scene and by age 19, I was shooting speed. That was the beginning of my complete degradation. I didn't give a shit about anything except the drugs.

I started doing county jail time for 30, 60, and 90 days, but if that was the worst consequence I faced, I didn't care. The notoriety of being a drug dealer was great for my ego. My whole belief system was twisted.

In 2004, I stole a tow-truck with a Corvette on top of it and pulled up to an office building to show it to my attorney. While I was inside, the police ran the license plate and they started to search the building. I ended up barricading myself in my lawyer's office and when the cops rushed in, I jumped headfirst out of the three-story building.

As I jumped out the window, I struggled to get upright and my foot hit one of the cops in his face. Amazingly, I landed on my feet and I looked up and made eye contact with him. His glasses were all askew and his face was covered in blood. After a helicopter chase and blocked streets, they finally caught me. They beat me so bad that I thought they were going to kill me. That was when I went to prison.

When I got out in 2004, I lasted 37 days. In all those years in prison, nobody ever offered me drug treatment. As I was getting ushered out of the courtroom after being given two more years, I turned to the judge and said, 'I'm a fucking drug addict, man. Can I get some help?' The judge said, 'You're more than welcome to get some help, but you can do it on your own after you do the two years.'

When I got out two years later, I asked my parole agent for treatment. He laughed at me and told me I wouldn't make it, but he'd let me try. I got into residential treatment at New Bridge Foundation and I finally started to look at the damage I had done to myself, my family, and to all the people I had victimized.

I got referred to a job at a tree-cutting service and started mechanical work on the trucks because I didn't have a driver's license. My boss paid one of his drivers to be my trainer so I could get my Class A license and I was eventually hired at Caltrans. I went from being a state parolee to working for the state of California!

When big ships need to change course, you don't just turn the wheel and get back on course. You need a tugboat for assistance. New Bridge and Narcotics Anonymous were tugboats for me. Giving back to the community has helped and I run Narcotic Anonymous groups in the San Francisco County Jail.

If you're serious about change, you have to be around people that have already made that change. You need to put your faith in something bigger than yourself. I believe that the only reason I'm not dead or in prison is because God has a plan for me — **and the only way I can carry out that plan is by staying clean. None of us can do this alone! ■**





“Whether I was on the inside or the outside, I didn’t feel worthy of living a regular life, but now my eyes are open to a different path.”

—Yema Lee

Yema Lee, age 41, is a peer mentor with the Gamble Institute's Street Scholars program that provides academic mentoring and support to formerly incarcerated college students. She was in Santa Rita Jail and Valley State Prison for a total of eight years between the ages of 21 and 35.

I was born into crime. My mother's husband sold drugs, and I had uncles who were pimps and aunts who were prostitutes. By the time I was seven, I was selling matchboxes of weed. I moved to West Oakland when I was 11 and we started selling cocaine and heroin. My whole family was into the business.

In the late 70's and early 80's when crack came into my community, I was ready. Lawyers and doctors would come all the way to the ghetto 'cause we had the best crack in town. I worked from 3:00 AM to 7:00 AM and as soon as my shift was over, I jumped back in my window and changed clothes to go to school. I committed my first burglary when I was 12. All I was thinking was that I was broke and I wanted money — simple as that.

I'd been doing crime since I was six years old, but I was never busted. I'd been shot at, I shot someone, I sold and used drugs, but I never got arrested until I was 21. I was busted for jaywalking by the Housing Authority and I started cussing the officer out so much that he put me in cuffs. It was my first time in jail and I was a little spooked. Somebody called me a whore, so I fought her and served 16 months for that.

I don't think being a criminal was my nature — I adopted the lifestyle to fit in. It goes back to being sexually molested, growing up with parents who didn't care about me, and being black in West Oakland. I was angry all the time. The cops didn't know what my life was like, so every time I was arrested I would go off on them. I'll be honest — I still have problems with anger, but back then I would be breaking windows in cars when I was upset.

I got married when I was 16 and had two kids. I would do anything to make sure they had what they needed so I was selling drugs, going to school, and working. I had ideas about going to college, but nothing seemed to allow me to do that. Many jobs weren't open to me 'cause I was on parole. I tried to do it legally. I went to East Bay Conservation Corps and Welfare to Work, but it didn't work out, so I went back to crime.

The last time I was in Santa Rita, I was tired of not seeing my children and being cut-off from my family, but I had no idea of how to change. So I started praying. God got the idea, not me. I broke down and didn't leave my cell or eat for almost a week. I kept asking for help and after six days, I got an answer. I finally realized that I was the problem and if I stayed away from drugs and changed everyone I hung out with, I would be okay.

I got out in 2008 and went to Walden House, where I learned self-love. Then I went to Women on the Way, a residential treatment program in Hayward, and I figured out my emotions. Then I went to the Gamble Institute and I found a purpose there.

Write down the crimes that you've committed and what you have gained from these crimes. Then list how much time you have spent with your family and how much time you spent in jail. You'll find that you were either on your way to committing a crime, on your way to using, or on your way to jail.

Even thinking about crime poisons you. It poisons you on the inside and it poisons your spirit. And then you want to use drugs to cover up the shame.

Criminality and addiction go hand-in-hand. I am thankful that I'm free now. ■





“Instead of wallowing in self-pity, I finally started to do something about my situation.”

— John Holman

John Holman, age 44, started volunteering with Oakland's Healthy Communities nine years ago and has risen to being the Technology Support and Site Director. He spent 10 years in county jails and California State Prisons.

I never met my parents. A friend of the family raised me until I was four and when she passed away, I went into foster care.

I ended up with an abusive uncle who would get drunk and beat me. I progressed quickly into petty crime and when I was 16, the court remanded me to a group home and I stayed there until I was emancipated at age 18.

I got absolutely no support after foster placement. Because I never had any guidance, all of my money disappeared into whatever I wanted at the moment. I gradually got back into stealing cars — mostly for joy riding, but I was caught and sent to California Youth Authority.

When I got out, I was placed in a halfway house and when I had one day left, I went to General Assistance and waited in line for three hours. The lady said, 'I can't help you because you have a place to live today — you need to come back tomorrow when you don't have a place to live.' So I left and stole a car that night. I felt justified because I didn't get the help I needed. When they caught me a month later, I was convicted and sent to San Quentin because by then I was 19.

I got out in 1990 and met my wife who soon became pregnant and my life began to turn around. By 1997 we were able to buy a house because I was so successful at my own computer business. But in 1999, I had an accident and ruptured several discs in my neck. Soon after, I discovered that my wife was cheating on me and things snowballed. She moved out and I sank my business and let my house go into foreclosure. After I made arrangements for my children and knew they were safe, I spiraled out of control and started using meth and began to make fake checks and IDs. I was completely lost again.

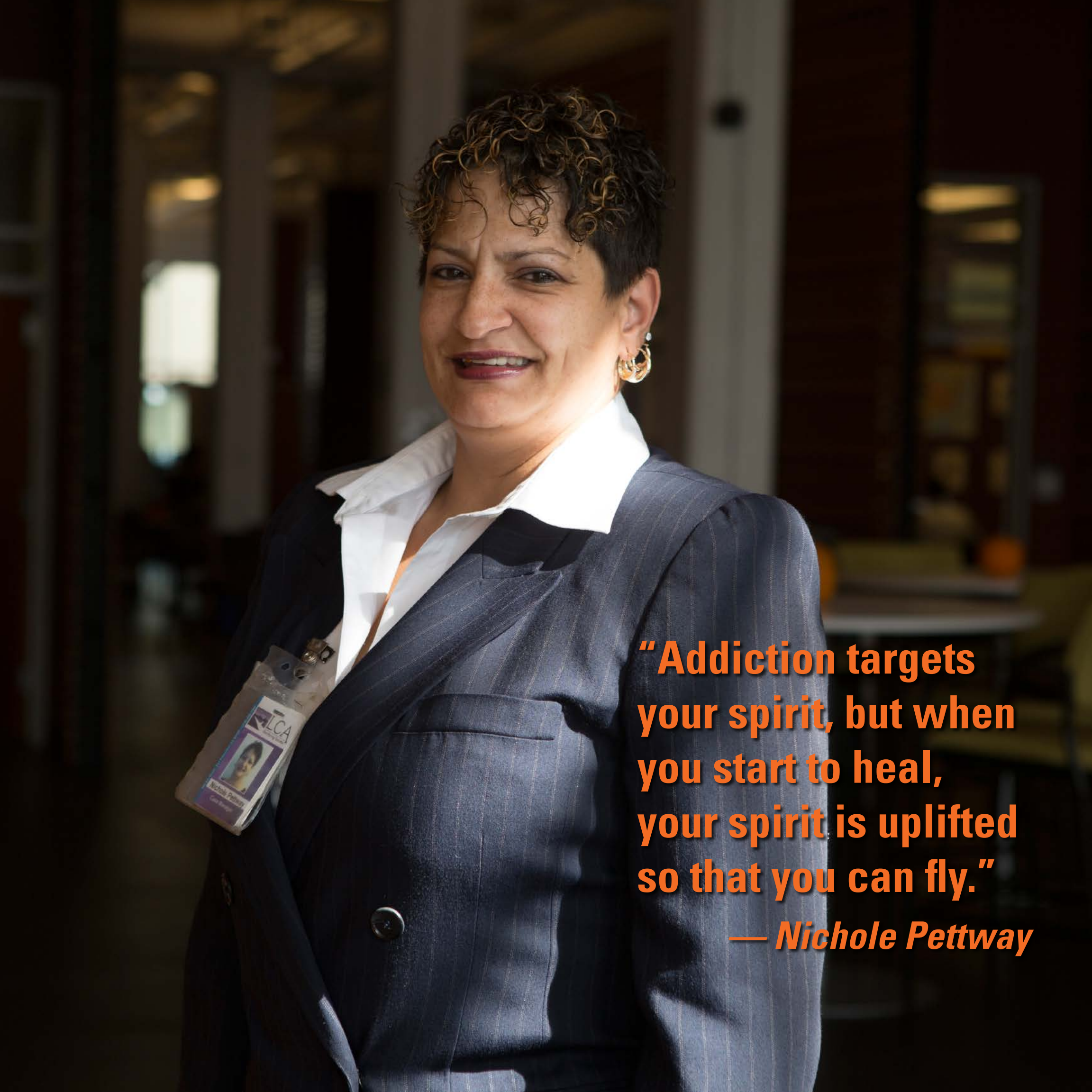
I had been in and out of jail and prison, but I never got help with my mental health issues. Instead of taking county time, I asked for state prison time because I thought I would get more help and was given 16 months at San Quentin. When I got out, my parole officer asked me for my address and I said I had none. She told me, 'You are not a convicted drug felon so I can't do

anything for you. Let's meet at the bus stop.' So I never went to see her again. Soon after, I stole a camera and didn't even try to be slick about it. I subconsciously wanted to be sent back to prison. I was incredibly angry and there was never anyone to help me work through my issues.

When I got out in 2005, my parole officer referred me to Volunteers for America and I finally got a place to live. I met Pastor Raymond E. Lankford, a co-founder of Healthy Oakland, now Healthy Communities, Inc. That was the turning point for me. He was the male role model I desperately wanted my entire life. I never had a father and I wanted to make sure that my children had a father in their lives, so I started to turn things around.

Some of my problems came about because of the foster care and criminal justice system, but instead of wallowing in self-pity, I finally started to do something about it. **When you feel like you are the only one that has had these kinds of experiences, the mountains you have to climb can seem insurmountable. All you have to do is be ready to take that first step. ■**





“Addiction targets your spirit, but when you start to heal, your spirit is uplifted so that you can fly.”

— Nichole Pettway

Nichole Pettway, age 47, spent a total of five years in county jails and eight years in California State Prisons. She is a Certified Addictions Treatment Counselor at a re-entry program in San Francisco and is completing her Bachelor's Degree. She hopes to open a transitional house for women leaving the criminal justice system.

I was born and raised in Boston. Because of my very light skin, I had a lot of identity crises

because I identified with my African-American culture, but it was difficult because neighborhoods and schools were segregated. I was told to act and talk in a certain way dictated by my light skin.

As a child, I had some traumatic experiences. My stepfather molested me when I was very young and it went on for years, but I never told anybody. I learned to cope with it through manipulation: 'If I don't get that Barbie doll, I'm gonna tell on you.' I learned that if I pleased men, I could get what I wanted.

I was the youngest of six and didn't get much attention, so I looked for love in all the wrong places. By 14, I was sleeping with men for money. I felt a sense of power and control even though I was out of control on the inside. I started freebasing cocaine when I was 16 and it helped me put on a façade. I learned to disassociate from my breasts and other parts of my body and that helped me in the trade. Drugs helped me in those moments when I felt like I was selling my soul.

I left Boston when I was 15 and ended up in California where my criminal activity really took off. I was in the sex trade, doing identity theft, and forging checks. The drugs switched from freebasing to crack cocaine. I was into prostitution before I got into drugs, so I was able to maintain my high because I was in the trade.

I got pregnant by a drug dealer, but he did not believe I was carrying his child so he shunned me. I continued to use drugs during my pregnancy and my first child was born addicted to cocaine and was mostly raised by my mother. Drugs don't allow you to feel your feelings. When I gave birth to a daughter who was addicted to crack, that did not even hit me. There was so much guilt and shame that I continued to use in order to deal with it. Once you cross the line from use to abuse, there is no going back. The results are always the same: jails, institution, or death. It may not be your death, but it might be the death of someone you love.

My mother passed away and I was so loaded at her funeral that I couldn't cry. I looked good on the outside, but my disease had taken me so far

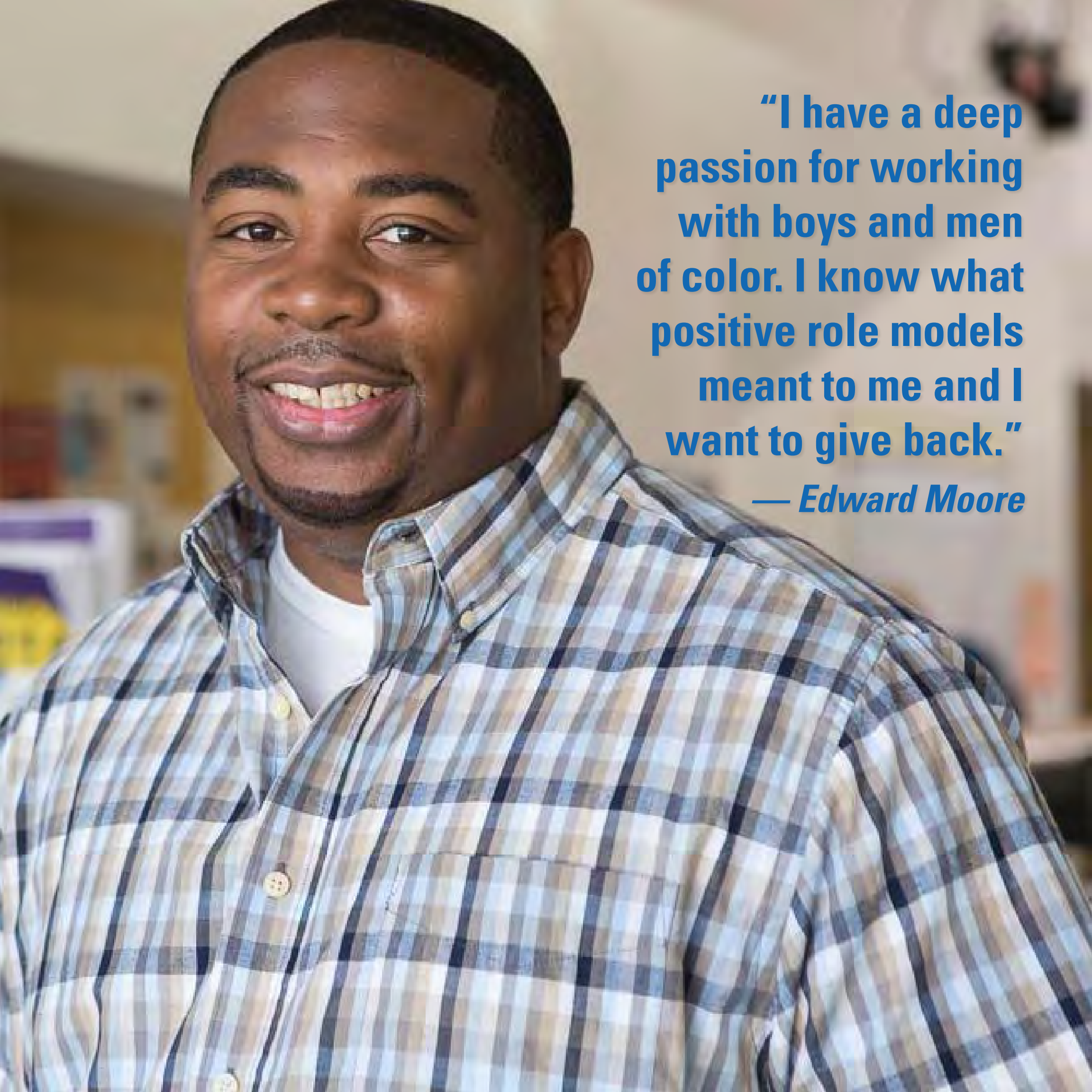
down I was dying on the inside. After my mother died, I stayed high for 13 days straight. I gave birth to two more children and my third child was born while I was in prison. I felt horrible about myself, but desperation can sometimes be a gift.

Handcuffs were always a divine intervention for me. Incarceration protected me from my addiction and helped me do what I wasn't able to do on the outside. On the inside, I had the freedom to choose because I didn't have the monkey on my back. When I finally realized that I had a disease that affected my behavior and character, things started to change.

My adult children are in my life today and I consider myself to be a physically and emotionally available parent, but they did not have that growing up. They developed their own trust issues, so it took time to re-establish those relationships. It hurts your family so much to see you in despair, but once they see you changing, they can open up to you like a flower. It takes time for that flower to bloom, so be patient with yourself and the people in your circle.

Addiction targets your spirit, but when you start to heal, your spirit is uplifted so that you can fly. ■





“I have a deep passion for working with boys and men of color. I know what positive role models meant to me and I want to give back.”

— *Edward Moore*

Eddie Moore, age 38, serves East Oakland youth as a case manager at Youth Uprising.

He leads domestic violence groups for A Safe Place and is an ordained minister.

He was involved in crime between the ages of 11 and 23.

My mother was involved in crime and battled with addiction her whole life. In fact, she was incarcerated on my first birthday. I had a cousin who had a lot of material things and I kept asking how he got them. He told me that when the time was right, he would show me. So I learned how to sell crack by the time I was 11 years old.

My grandma took good care of me, but it's different than having a mother. My mom was in and out of prison and when she wasn't in prison, she was in her addiction. I continued to sell crack and I had enough money to buy a car by the time I was 14.

Once I was jaywalking and the cops came up to me. They ran my name and saw that I had a warrant out so I ran and threw away the crack I had on me. I was busted and an officer said that they found 14 bags of marijuana that I had hidden in the back of the police car. They planted it cause they wanted to get me. I ended up with a felony conviction and was sent to Santa Rita. I was 19.

I was on probation when I got into a verbal altercation with my girlfriend, but she made a police report saying I hit her. She went with me to my probation officer to tell him the truth, but they immediately took me into custody. They can give you whatever they want for violating probation.

They wanted to send me to prison, but I had a great public defender so I got county time instead. I had to go to a program called Resolve to Stop the Violence and if I didn't complete it, I would go straight to prison. The program included anger management, domestic violence, and drug addiction. I finally started to understand that I abused substances and that I had issues with anger and violence. Many of the SF Sheriff's Department staff poured love and positive modeling into me and taught me about personal accountability.

When I got out, RSVP asked me to do an internship and I was eventually offered a full-time position. So I was working in the same jail within a year of my release! I stayed with RSVP from 2001 to 2005 and then I took a position with Western Addition Family Resource Center. I ended up becoming certified as a Batterer Intervention Facilitator.

A tragic event happened that was another crossroad. I was coming out of a nightclub in San Francisco and a guy shot me point blank in my chest. The wound was about six inches away from my heart and my left lung collapsed. When I got out of the hospital my peers wanted me to retaliate, but I knew that I didn't want to hurt anyone. That was the best decision I ever made.

I needed to get away from the city so I moved to Oakland. I prayed for three things: I wanted to work in domestic violence, work with young people, and not be sitting at a desk. I got all three of those prayers answered when I got a job as a Teen Coordinator at A Safe Place.

I have a deep passion for working with boys and men of color. I know what positive role models meant to me. A lot of our youth don't know how to receive love. It may take them having a friend die or a family member incarcerated before they are ready to change. I tell them, **'You don't have to know the whole path — you just have to be committed to taking the first step.'** ■





**“At some point,
my spirit was
screaming out
for help. I finally
started on a
mission to figure
out what was
wrong with me.”**

— Erin Evans

Erin Evans, age 44, is a designer and painter of custom artwork for motorcycles. He also facilitates Narcotics Anonymous meetings in Alameda County. He spent seven years in county jails and California State Prisons.

All I saw growing up were people selling dope and drinking. I had trouble in school and I didn't feel I could measure up, so I started smoking dope. I got pushed from one grade to another with D's, so by the time I got to high school I had a fourth grade education. I had a lot of insecurities so it was easy to get addicted to the attention I got from selling drugs.

After high school, I became an outlaw biker and took steroids to look even bigger. When you deal large amounts of drugs, people owe you large amounts of money and you start to use physical threats to collect. You start getting robbed and people take guns to your head. Sometimes I hurt people so there was a lot of shame. The shame got so big that I had to keep using drugs to shut that mother up.

Every time I got out of jail or prison I'd stay clean for a while, but I'd always fall short of my idea of what it meant to be a man. I would dress myself up in tattoos and sleep with as many women as I wanted, but I was falling short because real men take care of their family. And when you are in prison, you lose the ability to take care of your kids.

I was in several high-speed chases with the cops. Once I was beaten by the police after a chase and handcuffed to the hospital bed. I've got dog bites all over me from police dogs after I tried to run away. I always thought the problem was the police and not what I was doing. My addicted mind couldn't wrap itself around the fact that if I stopped doing drugs, I would stop getting busted.

By the fourth time I was imprisoned, I started to think that maybe there was something wrong with me.

I got hurt in a fight and I had a compound fracture in my femur so I went into custody for my last prison term at San Quentin on crutches. All the other times I could play the tough guy, but this time I had to sit down everywhere I went and I was in a lot of pain.

I never wanted to believe in God, but something happened when I was in San Quentin. I started to get visions that I needed to change

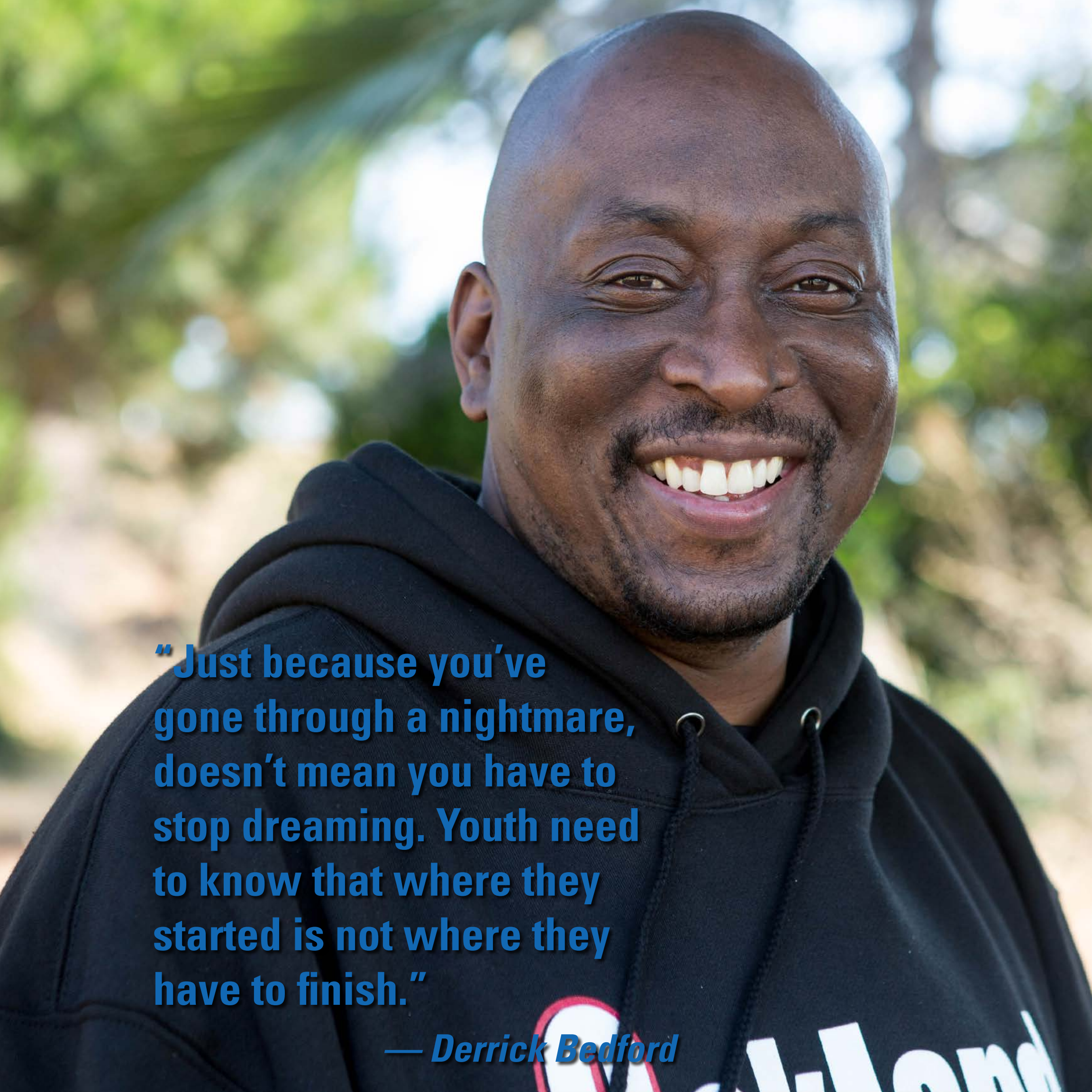
my life. I got into a bad fight and the staples in my leg were pulling apart. A pastor came to see me when I was in lockdown and I asked him, 'Who sent you?' and he said 'God sent me.'

When I was beaten-up by the police and others, I would never allow myself to cry. Some of the strong men in Narcotics Anonymous finally showed me how to cry. My spirit was screaming out for help so I finally started on a mission to figure out what was wrong with me. What helped me most was being with positive male role models that had been through what I had been through.

You can beat addicts or pray over them, but they are not going to change until they're ready. Addicts need love, but they don't know how to express it. Surrendering my tough guy mask was one of my biggest steps.

I try to make amends now by speaking at high schools and foster youth programs. There are things in life that you see as tragedies, but they can be growing moments. When my daughter was born with Down's syndrome, it felt like a tragedy and my insecurities made me want to run and hide, but she has been teaching me how to love. **God sends special children to people that need help and I needed help learning how to love. ■**





“Just because you’ve gone through a nightmare, doesn’t mean you have to stop dreaming. Youth need to know that where they started is not where they have to finish.”

— Derrick Bedford

Derrick Bedford is the Compliance and Standards Supervisor at Juvenile Hall in Alameda County.

He has been helping youth in the criminal justice system for the past 15 years.

My personal story isn't that different from a lot of youth who grew up in East Oakland.

I want youth to understand that if I could turn my life around, so can they. I was introduced to the streets in my early teens, sold drugs for over a decade, and made hundreds of thousands of dollars in the process. But with that came a lot of violence, criminal cases, and dead homies.

Having money at such an early age was a gift and a curse. I was able to enjoy the finer things of life, but I grew up not understanding the value of money. A fight got me expelled from Oakland Public Schools when I was 13 years old. From there I was unable to get back on the educational track until later in life. After spending the majority of my teens in Juvenile Hall and making multiple trips to Santa Rita Jail in my young adulthood, I decided that it was time to not only make a change, but to make a difference.

The turning point came when I encountered Judge Larry Goodman. I had been in his courtroom before, but I was back for a case that involved firearms. The judge wanted to give me a chance so he gave me a joint suspended sentence. If I admitted to the charges I would be released on probation, but if I came back into custody for something as minor as a traffic ticket, I would be sent to prison for five years. Under the terms of my suspension, I started volunteering with The Underground Railroad that later became Crossroads Mentoring. My felonies were reduced to misdemeanors and eventually dismissed because of my passion for becoming a better person.

I was determined to not go back to the streets. The judge saw that I was changing and offered me the opportunity to mentor youth. Then I was hired as an intervention specialist for Caught in the Crossfire, an anti-violence project. The very same institution where I was once locked up eventually employed me! I am now the supervisor of several staff that worked at Alameda County Juvenile Hall when I was there as a teen.

At Juvenile Hall I worked with youth coming into custody, in the mental health unit, and I also taught employment and social skills. My job as


Compliance and Standards Supervisor allows me to ensure quality of care and to educate youth about their rights. I want to make sure youth know how to navigate the system.

If you are involved in the game, step back and look at your life. If you want to go to prison or be dead, you don't have to make any changes. But I know that most youth want to be successful. They have been let down so many times that they have trust issues with others and with themselves. They need folks to guide them and that is what I have been doing for the past 15 years.

I ended up in a supervisory position at Juvenile Hall because of the skills and entrepreneurial spirit that were part of my life on the streets. No matter what these kids have been through, I have experience they can relate to. I tell youth that resilience is the key. Every youth has tools that they can use and I have spent most of my career helping them identify their strengths.

Just because you've gone through a nightmare, doesn't mean you have to stop dreaming. I never stopped dreaming and that's why I'm in the position today of being able to help mentor youth through some terrible times. **I hope youth can hear my story and know that where they started is not where they have to finish. Their life is not over — it is just beginning. ■**





**“You don’t have
to settle. Set
your bar higher
than you think
you can do and
just take a few
steps at a time.”**

— Roxanne Perez

Roxanne Perez, age 53, is a manager at a jewelry store. She spent 19 years in and out of juvenile detention, county jails and California State Prisons beginning at age 14.

I grew up in San Lorenzo and started smoking dope and sniffing glue by the time I was nine.

My mother raised three girls as a single mom and my dad died of a heroin overdose when I was five. They found him beaten to a pulp because he probably tried to rob somebody.

Just because he was an addict didn't mean that I had to be one. That was my choice. I wanted to be a bad ass. I was on probation by the time I was 10. My mom saw stains on the rug from the glue we were sniffing so she called the police and we were all put on probation.

I started smoking PCP when I was 13 and then started to sell it. When I was in Juvenile Hall they isolated me because I was fighting every chance I got. I don't remember feeling angry. Fighting just felt like fun to me.

I started stealing at department stores when I was 14, and by 16 I was stealing to make a profit. I was in a drug treatment program through juvenile hall when my sister killed herself at the San Leandro Police Station. She got crazy from smoking too much PCP. When I got out, I stopped using PCP 'cause it messed my sister up, and I started shooting heroin instead.

I married my partner in crime when I was 17. He had a good job, but we needed more money because we were shooting heroin every day. We thought armed robberies would be easier and faster so we robbed cinemas and food joints. We did this until the police raided our house and found PCP and other drugs. I got six months and he went to prison for two years.

When I was arrested at age 20 and sent to prison, they offered me drug treatment, but I didn't want to stop using. I got out when I was 22 and was back inside within six months. When I got out the next time, I shifted from robbery to prostitution because you get less time for prostitution. I worked the streets from when I was 22 to about 37.

I went to San Francisco because it was easier to get on General Assistance, but I eventually became homeless. I ended up totally degrading myself: I was pushing a shopping cart and down to 81 pounds.

My skin was literally hanging off my body. By then, I had been shooting heroin and smoking crack for almost 10 years.

I ended up in Santa Rita again and I finally said I would go to a treatment program. But even then, I thought I would go to a program and get out and go back to shooting dope. I had no idea how to live without drugs.

I ended up at a residential treatment program in Berkeley called New Bridge and eventually got a job selling jewelry. That was a miracle! I became one of the best sellers at the company. I finally started getting my self-esteem needs met doing something I was good at besides crime. In recovery programs they say that a job won't keep you clean, but having a job did help keep me clean.

All I can say to people getting out is go to a few recovery meetings and feel the love. If I didn't stay connected to other recovering addicts, I would not have been able to stay clean for 18 years.

You have got to face it. You've done unspeakable things. **You're tired of being a nobody and you're tired of looking in the mirror and seeing a blank soul. So what do you have to lose? ■**





**“I’ll never do anything
again that can hurt the
people I love or take
me away from them.”**

— *Darryl Johnson*

Darryl Johnson, age 52, is the front desk manager at Options Recovery Services, a substance abuse treatment program in Berkeley. He is working on his certification to become an addiction counselor. First arrested at age 27, Darryl was in and out of Santa Rita Jail and California State Prisons for 18 years.

What got me into the life was seeing all the drug dealers with the fancy cars in West Oakland. In the fifth grade, my parents broke up and my stepfather came into my life. He helped me get my first sack of dope when I was 12 years old and I learned to sell joints. I started smoking crack when I was 15.

Even though I was selling drugs, I was focused on school and graduated from Oakland Technical High School. After high school, I got an apartment and worked at the Oakland Army base and eventually got married. One day I let my wife try crack and she got hooked right away. I started going down with her and my whole world fell apart.

I was in the Army for over two years. With just six months left, I went AWOL and ended up going to jail and then to prison on drug possession and dealing. I didn't know anything outside the life of drugs and dealing and never heard about recovery in any prison I was in.

When I got out, I became even more addicted and ended up living on church stairs and in abandoned houses from 1989-92. I had a place to stay, but my pride wouldn't let me go there. My daughter was living in a house with her mom, but I didn't want her to see me in the state I was in. I stopped using for about 18 months, but I was still selling. I had shoeboxes of money under my bed. I hadn't just been addicted to drugs; I was addicted to all the attention you get when you deal drugs.

A friend had been out of prison and was working, but he fell back into drugs. I was with him when he ran away from a guy with a gun. I ran in one direction, but he ran in another and was looking back at the guy with the gun when he ran full force into a fence. They just went up to him — bam! bam! bam! and he was dead. That hit me real hard.

My last sentence was for eight years, but I ended up doing only 39 months because I worked in the fire camp for two-and-a-half years. When I got out in 2007, the parole board finally gave me a treatment program and I ended up at Options Recovery. It wasn't


until I was in a class on denial management that I began to see my way out of this.

When I was in prison I didn't think I was hurting anybody else, but I started to realize the harm I had caused my family and my kids. I finally realized that it was what I was doing that caused my life to be in chaos. The Berkeley Police weren't stopping me 'cause I was planting flowers; they stopped me because I was selling dope.

My sister stayed in my corner and visited me in prison and my mother managed to send me money. It makes a big difference when your family sticks by you. As soon as my kids turned 18, they visited me in prison, never giving up on me. The last time I got out, four of them came to pick me up. I'm a single dad now and have sole custody of my 14-year-old and 3-year-old.

For people still caught up in the life, you got to realize that it isn't going to get any better unless you put the work in. You can't tell people 'I love you' when you're doing something that takes you away from them. I'm coming up to seven years clean and sober. **I'll never do anything again that hurts the people I love or takes me away from them. ■**





**“You don’t have to
come from a criminal
lifestyle — you can
make one bad decision
and it can change your
entire life.”**

— *Stephanie Viscaino*

Stephanie Viscaino, age 48, is the program manager at Men and Women on the Way, a transitional treatment program. She is a Registered Addiction Specialist and a Certified Forensic Counselor. She spent a total of eight years in Santa Rita Jail and Central California Women's Facility.

I didn't start into crime until my mid 30s. It started with meth. Until then, I was working at a good job with the Post Office and was the mother of two children. I got divorced in my late 20s and that hit me hard. After the divorce, I started going to a bar almost every night and it turned into excessive drinking.

One night I was so intoxicated that when somebody offered me meth, I smoked it and got hooked immediately. I was tired delivering mail to 375 houses a day and speed gave me energy. I started to use so much that I stopped going to work and my crowd shifted to speed users. My younger brother was in and out of prison and even he told me to stop. I went from being a mom of the year to being an absent parent. My daughter kept asking, 'Why are you sending me to Grandma's all the time?'

I started forging checks and was eventually sent to Santa Rita Jail. I got out of jail quickly because I didn't have a record, but I committed another crime before my next court date. I was spinning out of control. Between ages 33 and 41, I think I missed seven Christmas seasons with my kids.

I got a lot out of the programs at Santa Rita, but I wasn't ready to change. I had respect and good pay during my 11 years at the Post Office and I was overwhelmed with anxiety about getting that kind of job again. My self-image kept getting worse and I kept returning to crime. One sheriff at Santa Rita was caring enough to ask, 'How did this happen to you? You didn't have a criminal history and you had a good job.' I could never tell him I had a drug problem. I wasn't ready to admit it.

I got out in January 2004 after 10 months in Chowchilla at the Central California Women's Facility. By July, I was back in prison with a two-year term. I remember waking up and asking myself, 'What am I doing here?' I finally admitted to the prison counselor that I had a drug problem and they gave me a referral to a substance abuse program.

They close Narcotics Anonymous meetings on the inside with this saying: 'Let's have a moment of silence for the addicts who are still using inside and outside these walls and for the children who have been caught in the crossfire.' I broke down when I heard that because I understood how much

I had hurt my kids. So, when I was offered a treatment program, I took it and things started to change.

After several treatment programs, I lived in a sober living house for over a year, trying to rebuild my life. I realized that I had made many mistakes and had addiction problems, but I wasn't a bad person.

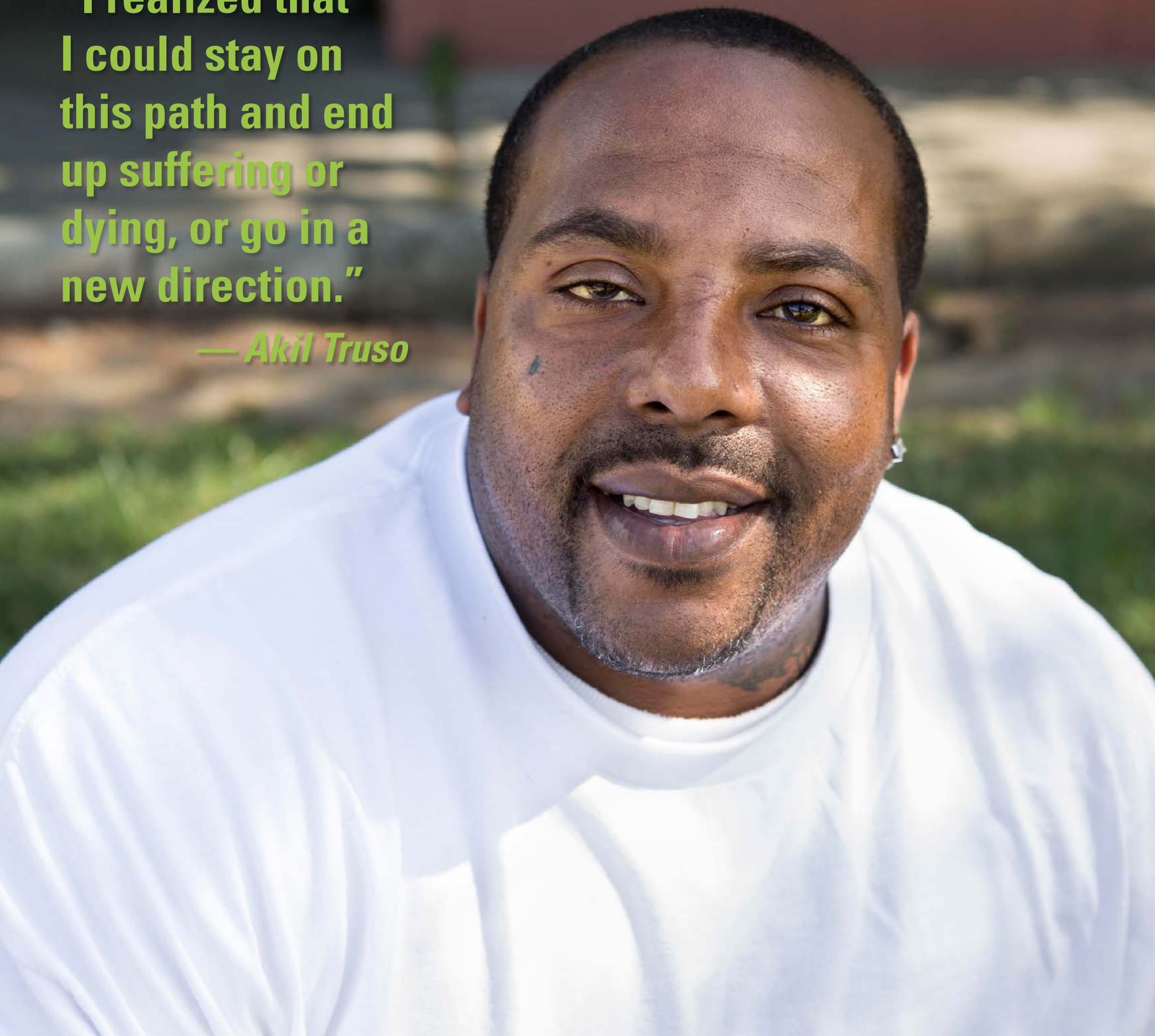
In 2006, the manager of one of the treatment programs asked me to volunteer. Through that experience, I became interested in being a counselor and did an internship at a methadone clinic. Over the next four years, I took classes in clinical supervision and forensic counseling and became a certified addiction specialist. I helped my brother get into treatment; he's now married, the stepdad of three children, and is working for Caltrans. My mother is on top of the world!

If you choose to be in and out of prison for the rest of your life, keep doing what you're doing. A clean and sober lifestyle is hard, but living a life of addiction and crime is much harder. It's important to hear my story because this could happen to anybody. **You don't have to come from a criminal lifestyle — you can make one bad decision and it can change your entire life. ■**



**“I realized that
I could stay on
this path and end
up suffering or
dying, or go in a
new direction.”**

— Akil Truso



Akil Truso, age 45, is the Area Team Leader for West Oakland's Violence Prevention Squad. He served over 10 sentences at Santa Rita Jail and was in and out of California State Prisons for six years between the ages of 18 and 38.

My parents separated when I was eight and I was back at forth between their homes. I searched the streets for somewhere to belong. Finally the streets adopted me: the winos and the gangsters were my uncles, the prostitutes and the boosters were my aunts, and the guys I stole with were my brothers.

I was 16 when I learned how to bag marijuana and cook up crack. At 18, I went to Santa Rita Jail and I was scared to death, but I got used to jail. I wanted more money than I made dealing so I started committing crimes with firearms. I would put the gun out the window of the car and people would start running. Then it was not only about the money — it was about having power and authority.

I had a serious wake-up call in my 30s when I realized that there was a hit out on my life. I ended up in San Quentin and one of the gang members said, 'You know what we gotta do?' I knew how they would do it: they would wait until the cell door opened and then rush in. I was scared of going through a painful death, but I wasn't scared about dying. Given everything that I had done, I didn't feel like I was worth saving.

The next day there was a lockdown in San Quentin and the cells didn't open. Someone told me that the hit was called off. Now when I see people who don't feel like their lives are worth saving, I tell them there is always hope — the dirtiest rag can be washed, bleached, and folded. If I can come from the gutter and get to the place I am today, you can too.

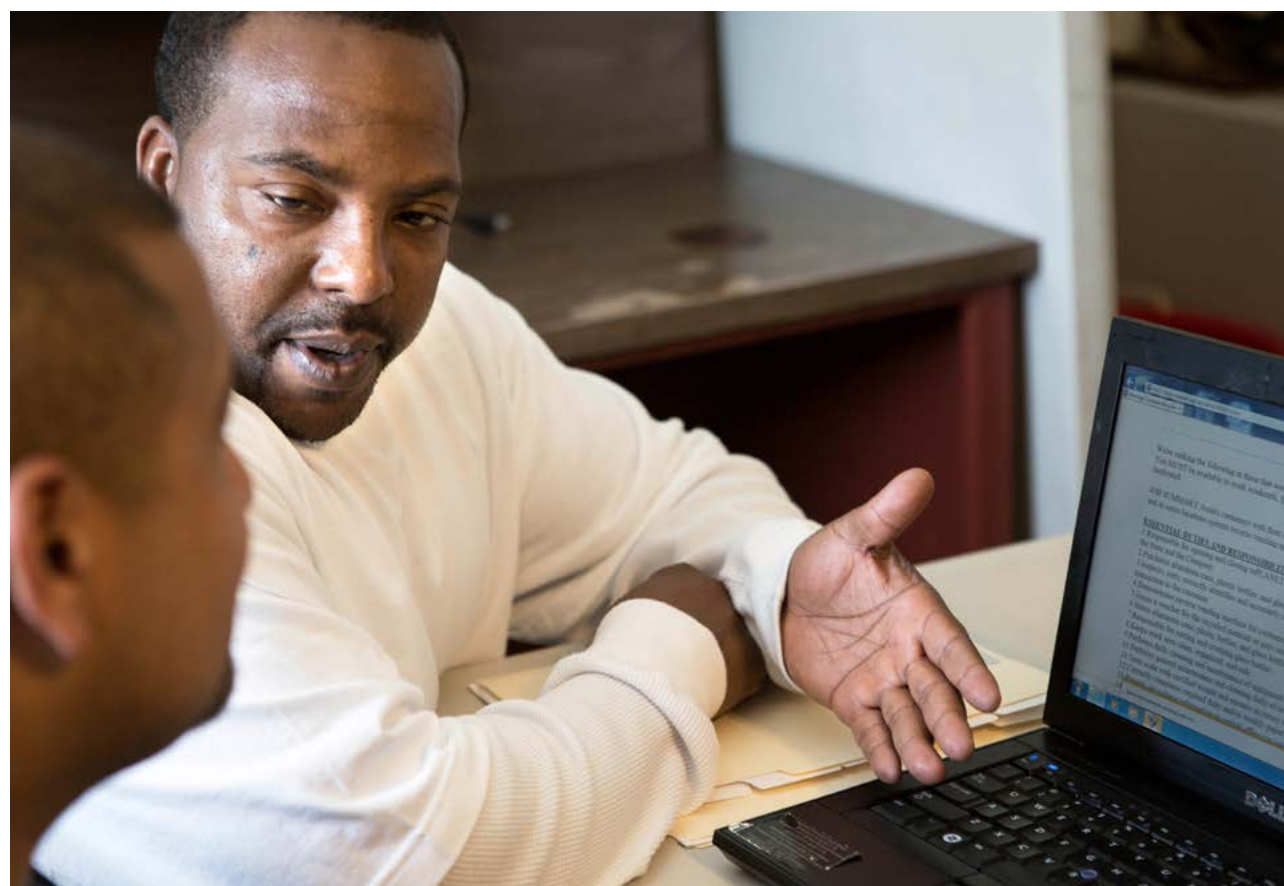
I got out in 2006 and made up my mind that I wasn't going back. I checked into a drug program and after the drugs were out of my system, there were a few nights I couldn't sleep. What kept me up some people call it Buddha, some people call it Jesus, some people call it Allah, some call it a Higher Power. All I know is that was a spiritual awakening because I could not have done this by myself. I had dreams of what my death would look like if

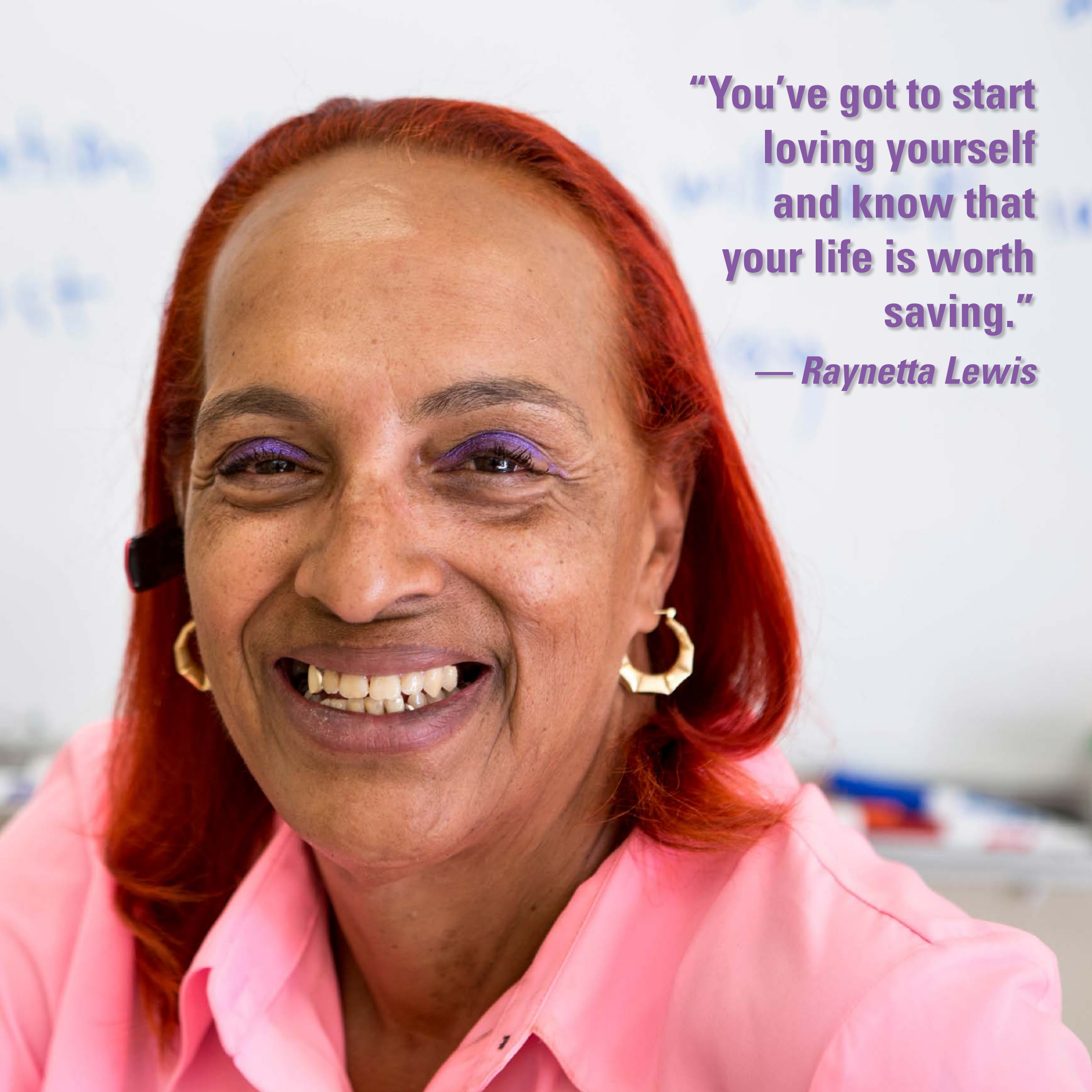
I continued in the criminal lifestyle. I knew I had a choice: stay on this path and end up suffering and dying or going in another direction.

After I got out, I would take the bus to another city where there was no criminal activity and spend hours in the library just to be safe. St. Vincent De Paul helped me in the past, so I asked if I could help out and they said yes. They saw that I was good at doing street outreach so they hired me. Then I got a job at Oakland Unite doing street outreach.

Now I ask the youth, 'Is the money you have worth all the people you have hurt? If you sold five rocks, what happened in those five people's lives because they chose to suck on that pipe? Are their kids eating at night? Did they get such a craving that they stole or inflicted physical harm?' Every drug dealer needs to know the damage they're doing to their own community.

What I want to see is all of us as one family in the Black community. **If we could sit down and eat together, I believe we would have a chance of lessening the violence. ■**





**“You’ve got to start
loving yourself
and know that
your life is worth
saving.”**

— *Raynetta Lewis*

Raynetta Lewis has been clean and sober since 1991 and is currently the program manager at a residential treatment facility serving the formerly incarcerated. She started her involvement with crime at age 14 and spent over 22 years in and out of jail and prison.

I was set to be a valedictorian at my high school, but I dropped out in the 12th grade because I was selling heroin and couldn't

focus. My father paid for my college, but I didn't want any of that — I wanted the fast life. I was selling drugs and started to be my own best customer. Once I started using I started getting reckless: guns — all of it.

I went to California Youth Authority at 17. When I got out, I hooked up with a pimp who beat me for years. Then I got with a guy who taught me how to pickpocket and forge checks. So here comes prison by the time I was 21. There was as much dope on the inside as there was on the streets, so I was hooked the whole time. I ended up doing almost 22 years in and out — on the installment plan.

By the time I was 35, I hadn't had a period for two years 'cause I was on methadone, but I got pregnant anyway. I begged my parole officer to lock me back up because I was still shooting cocaine and I knew I was hurting my baby. My baby was born healthy while I was in the California Institute for Women and my mother came to pick her up.

I was set to parole, but a homicide detective from Alameda County came to talk to me about a murder rap 'cause someone that got shot in a robbery that I was involved in had just died. He told me, 'We have a warrant from Alameda County charging you with "murder one." I am going to make sure you never see that baby for the rest of your life.' After I heard that, I just passed out — broke down like a doubled-barrel shotgun.

When I realized that my life in crime could cost me my baby, I started to drop the prison mentality. The only thing I had was the Bible, so I started using that as my recovery tool. When I went back to Chowchilla, I started a Bible study group.

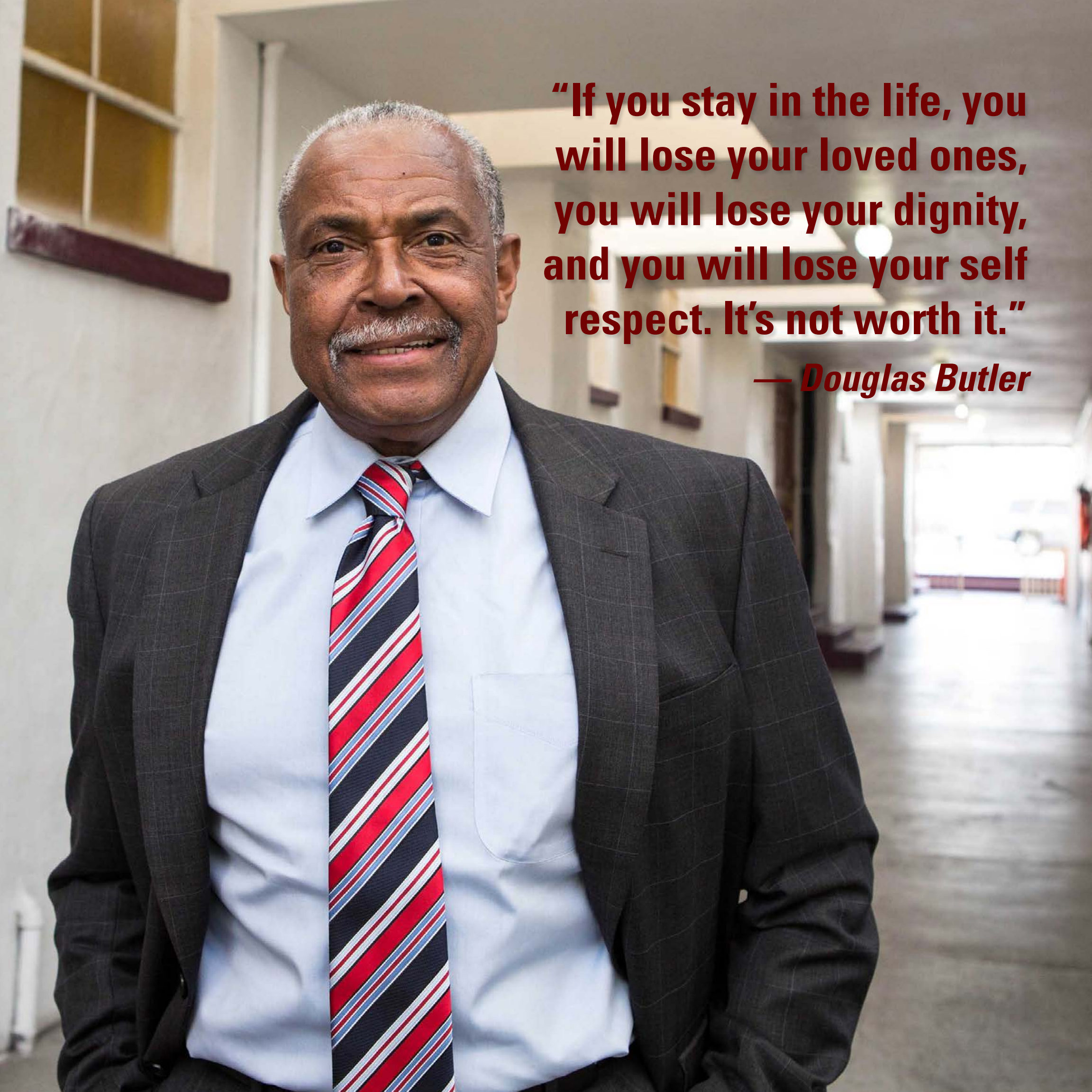
When I eventually got three years instead of the 27 they first charged me with, I knew that was a blessing. Many times when I was in the backseat of the police car I'd say, 'Lord help me. I promise I won't do this no more,' but as soon as I got out, I'd forget them words. But this time was different — I felt I owed him 'cause he had worked a miracle. I had a brand new baby that I had a chance to raise.

But Jesus with no other recovery tools won't work with an addict, so I started going to Narcotics Anonymous. Getting clean and sober is just the tip of the iceberg — you need to work on all these ugly things that come with the addict and prison uniform. It wasn't easy and it took a lot of years, but I was committed.

I went back to school and was certified as an addiction specialist. The people I work with have nothing when they get out of prison. Some of them were raped as a kid and they were raped in prison. But you have to understand that this life has but two doors — one door leads to institutions and the other one leads to death.

This is a life-long process. You have a disease, but you can keep it in remission if you keep using your tools. First time you think you got this all figured out and you don't need to work your tools, you are setting yourself up for relapse. **You need to work on the core issues that make you need to stay medicated. You've got to start loving yourself and know that your life is worth saving. ■**





“If you stay in the life, you will lose your loved ones, you will lose your dignity, and you will lose your self respect. It’s not worth it.”

— *Douglas Butler*

Douglas Butler is the director at Men of Valor in East Oakland where he works with parolees.

He spent 20 years in prison, much of it in the same cell at San Quentin.

I graduated in 1964 from Castlemont High and went to Merritt College. It was an intense time because of the Vietnam War and the draft. There

were a lot of demonstrations and some of the Black Panther Party went to Merritt so the FBI and the police were frequently on campus.

After Merritt, I entered the police academy and my first job was in Pittsburgh. In 1969, I moved to the Oakland Police Department and stayed until 1977. I was working off-duty security at a bar and there was a major altercation involving a lot of people and I ended out getting fired from the Oakland Police Department.

That was a big blow to me because I wanted to be a cop ever since I was a boy. I met somebody who had liquor stores and I started to work for him. He became involved in the cocaine business and I ended up dealing drugs too. In 1984, I was involved in an incident that resulted in someone losing his life and I was convicted on my third trial of first-degree murder. By 1993, I ended up in San Quentin and I was in the same cell until my release in 2004.

San Quentin put me in segregation because they thought I could be targeted for a kill because I had been a police officer. I convinced them to let me on the mainline because I wasn't worried about being shot. I spent all of my time in the law library and ended up getting a paralegal certificate. I was trying to demonstrate to the parole board that I was preparing myself to be a law-abiding citizen. I refused to believe that I would die in prison.

I was in prison for taking a human life so it was not realistic to think I would get out in 15 years. I was denied parole a dozen times and I finally got out in 2004 after 20 years in prison. I was 57 years old. The most painful loss I had was when my dad died in 2000 and I couldn't go to his funeral. My brother died just three months before I got out and that was really hard on me.

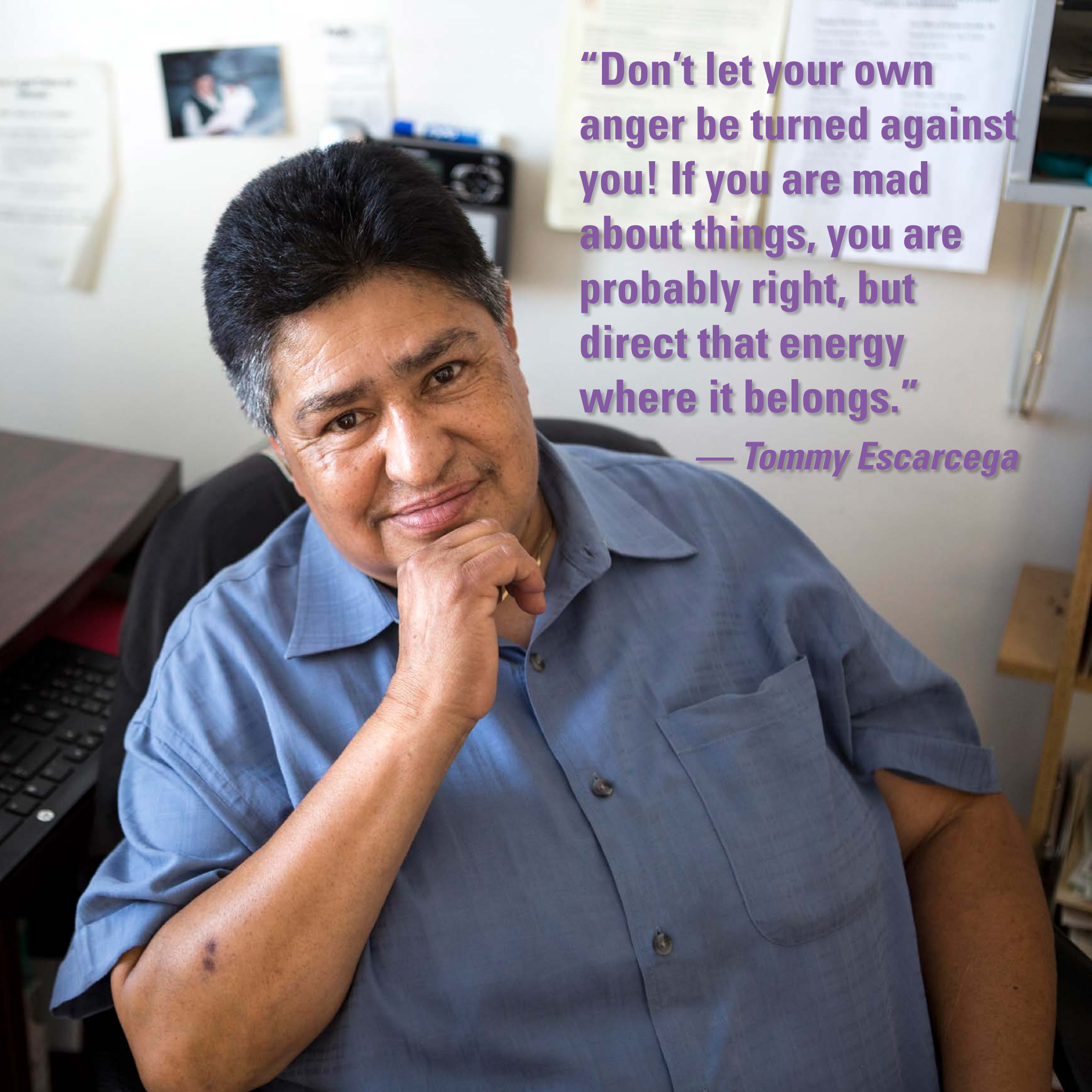
I was very fortunate that my mom was still alive when I got out. I resumed my relationship with her and my daughter who was nine when I was first incarcerated. My daughter didn't visit me in prison,

but we talked on the phone and exchanged letters all of those years. I had close friends who stayed in touch with me the entire time I was on the inside. It makes all the difference when people don't treat you as dead just because you're behind bars.

When I came home, an officer in the Oakland Police Department gave me \$2,000 to help me get back on my feet. I had been communicating with Bishop Jackson at the Acts Full Gospel Church from prison so when I got out, I was welcomed into a new church community. Bishop Jackson eventually asked me if I could start working at the Men of Valor Academy and I have been working there helping other men getting out of prison since 2005.

The life I got caught up in was not the life I was meant to have, so when I got out I didn't have to struggle with whether I was going to do crime again. For guys that still think they can live this life, this is where you will end up: in prison or dead. **You will lose your family and your loved ones — you will lose your dignity — you will lose your self-respect. It's not worth it. ■**



A photograph of Tommy Escarcega, a middle-aged man with dark hair, wearing a blue short-sleeved button-down shirt. He is sitting in an office, leaning forward with his chin resting on his hand, looking thoughtfully at the camera. The background shows a desk with a laptop, a printer, and some papers pinned to the wall.

**“Don’t let your own
anger be turned against
you! If you are mad
about things, you are
probably right, but
direct that energy
where it belongs.”**

— *Tommy Escarcega*

Tommy Escarcega, age 57, co-founded Proyecto Common Touch — a project that focuses on due process for parolees. She advocates for the right to education and the vote while incarcerated, especially for women. She has spent a total of 11 years in county jails and Valley State Prison.

I grew up in El Paso, Texas. As a young woman I saw injustices done to people that had a profound effect on me. I was taught that the police were the good guys, but I saw cops beating up people that were handcuffed. Police brutality was rampant.

I reacted to this, but not in a good way. Starting at age 16, I was in and out of jail for disorderly conduct and disturbing the peace. I didn't know how to focus my outrage. I was a lesbian butch who dressed in men's clothes and that didn't go over well in El Paso in the 1970s, especially with the cops. I was treated like a social pariah.

Since I had a long arrest record, but no convictions, many of the cops were pissed at me and would rough me up when they got a chance. I started to drink more and that camouflaged some of my other problems such as ADHD and depression. I also did my own share of fighting with the police.

One incident left deep scars. In 1979, I was arrested and attacked by a cop who was jealous because he thought I might be involved romantically with his mistress. He was slamming my head against the cell bars when a man who was waxing the floors signaled me to push back for my life. I did and the cop slipped on the wet floor and hurt his spinal cord and I was charged with attempted murder on a police officer. Ultimately the arresting officer told the truth and the charge was dropped, but I knew I had to get out of there. At age 22, I moved to Los Angeles.

In LA, I got caught up in the crack epidemic and sold drugs to make enough money to pay for my own drugs. When you are addicted, you get lost in the game and things started to go bad for me. I got a conviction for welfare and food stamps fraud and then I was busted for drug possession and sentenced to two years in Valley State Prison. I had some education and I started to help other women in prison filing appeals. My passion to curb injustices kept me from going down the drain and has inspired my personal, spiritual, and career paths.


Using drugs and drinking takes away your ability to make choices, but I finally set out to acquire the tools I needed to kick that obsession. I used to tell myself that I was caught in that life because of poverty, or as a

response to discrimination, or because I was a lesbian and ostracized. I would always focus on the deprivation in my life: it was because we were poor; it was because we were discriminated against; it was because I was a lesbian; or it was because I dressed in men's clothes. A lot of suffering was brought down on me, so I always thought my problems were because I was oppressed. I wasn't able to see the part about me having to deal with the pain that was inside of me. I finally realized that the world needed to change, but so did I.

Now I help people caught up in the system. I've seen a lot of injustice and violations of people's constitutional rights. People need to know their rights, whether they are incarcerated or not. We cannot leave them behind.

Don't let your own anger be turned against you! You need to put it in the right direction and in order to do that you need to heal. **If you are mad about things, you are probably right, but direct that energy where it belongs — not on yourself! ■**



A man with short, dark hair and a goatee, wearing a blue polo shirt, is sitting on the grass. He has extensive tattoos on both arms. He is holding a small, white and brown dog with a pink collar. The background shows a house and a fence.

**“People can recover!
You don’t have to live
the way you’re living
if you don’t want to.
There is a solution for
everyone.”**

— *Steven Czifra*

Steve Czifra is working on his BA in literature at the University of California, Berkeley. Between the ages of 12-30, he spent 15 years in California Youth Authority and state prisons — eight of which were in solitary confinement. He has been clean since his parole in 2004.

I've been taking things that didn't belong to me for most of my life. I was caught breaking and entering when I was eight. The first few years of my life were pretty good, but when I was five, everything fell apart. My dad was violent and abusive and my mom left him and took us to live with her, but she wasn't capable of parenting either. I wanted to be like my dad even though he was cold-hearted and mean. He met my security needs, but being physically hurt by him had a profound effect on my ability to negotiate the world.

I was a full-blown drug addict by the time I was 10 and had already been arrested for shoplifting, burglary, and breaking into cars. Because of my innocent looking white face, I was often allowed to go home while my black friends would go to juvenile hall. When I stole my mother's VCR, she called the cops and I was sent to juvenile hall. I was eventually placed in a group home and ran away. Then I got caught stealing a car, went to another group home, and ran away again.

By the time I was 12, I was committing a felony almost daily to support my drug habit, but no one was paying attention. The closest I got to an intervention was when a Los Angeles Police Department detective scared me with the threat of jail by telling me that I would be raped if I went to juvenile hall.

When I was 14, I was busted for carjacking. My public defender suggested I take the maximum sentence of 10 years, so I walked out of my arraignment and went to California Youth Authority for the rest of my childhood. I was in solitary confinement within months.

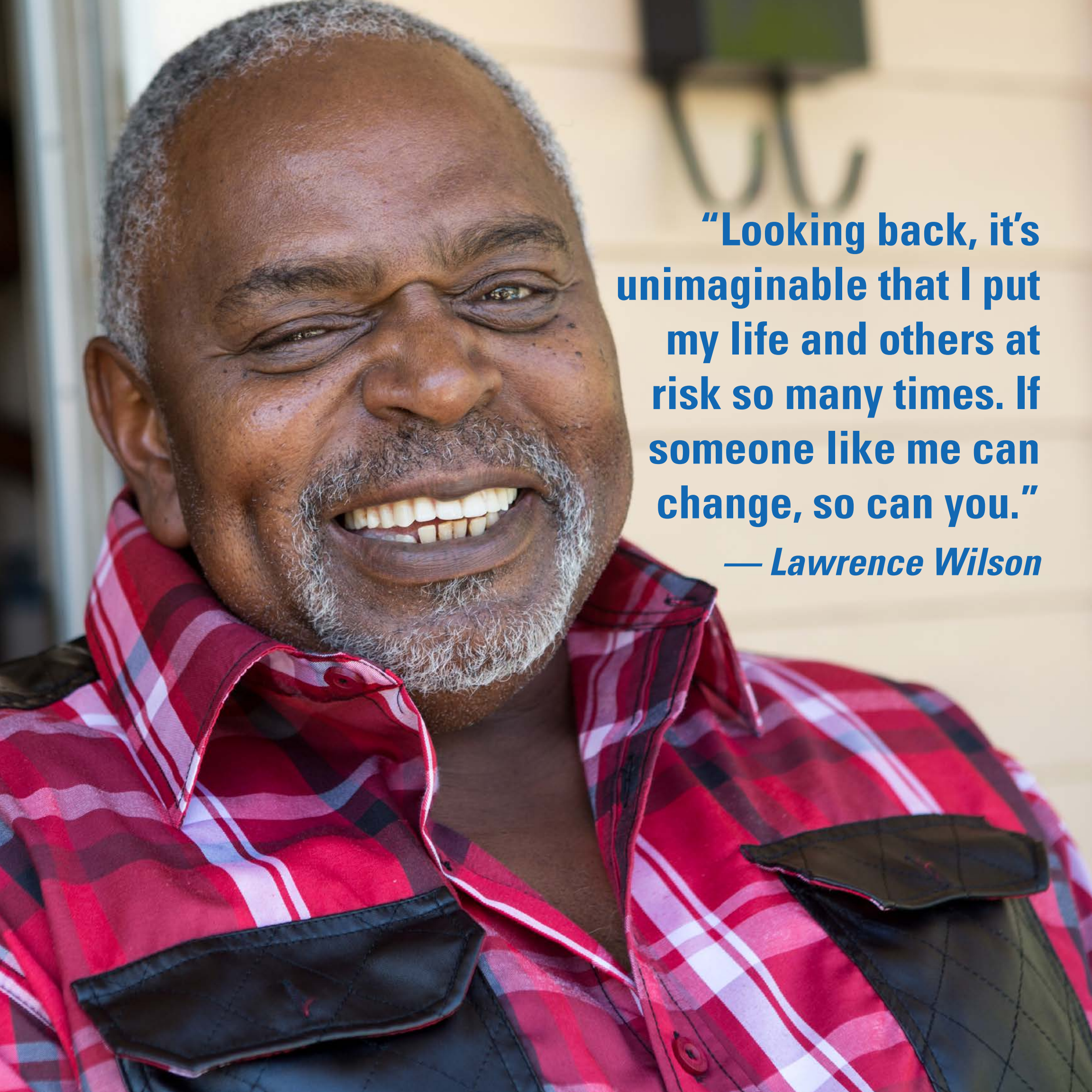
I was still in a youth facility at age 19 so I asked a parole commissioner if they would send me to prison so I could benefit from programs. She said I wasn't eligible because I was sentenced as a juvenile, but she told me what I could do to get into prison. I ended up kicking an officer and got five years. I was 22 when I got out, but I had an argument with my sister and pulled on her arm in front of a sheriff when she was in her car. They charged me with carjacking and I got another three and a half years.

Just when I was about to parole, I got into a fight and was put into administrative segregation where I spit on a prison guard who was taunting me. I was charged with a third strike and I could have spent the rest of my life in prison, but I got a decent judge and was given four years. I served two years in solitary confinement in the SHU (Security Housing Unit) at Corcoran State Prison and another two in the SHU at Pelican Bay. By then I had been incarcerated 10 years. I had a fifth grade education and I had no idea that I had a problem with drugs and alcohol.

When I got out, I met a biker guy in recovery who had everything I wanted: freedom, a Harley Davidson, friends, and family. I decided to try recovery and I finally stopped using the day before my 30th birthday. I realized that I was incapable of fixing my life with the same mindset that created the problems in the first place. Recovery changed my life.

I am one of those lucky people who have lived two lives. My son is seven years old and I am fully able to meet all of his physical and emotional needs. People do recover! **You don't have to live the way you're living if you don't want to. There is a solution for everyone — even for people like me. ■**





“Looking back, it’s unimagivable that I put my life and others at risk so many times. If someone like me can change, so can you.”

— *Lawrence Wilson*

Lawrence Wilson, age 63, volunteers at The Healing Circle — a support group for parents who have lost a child through gun violence. He was involved in crime between the ages of 13 and 36 and served 10 years in California State Prisons.

I had a good upbringing in a Christian home in Oakland, but I'd see the guys with Cadillacs and fancy jewelry and I wanted that life. If you don't have a good male role model at home, all you have are the bad role models in the streets.

When I was 13, I started as a lookout for the older guys while they committed crimes. I was arrested for burglary and sent to juvenile hall at 14; by high school I was doing armed robbery. I later started selling heroin and then got into pimping prostitutes. I had tons of money and helped my mother open a grocery store in San Francisco in 1972, which we kept going until 1986. I had a full-time job with San Francisco Municipal Railway and I was working at the store and still selling drugs on the side.

It all changed in 1986 when my mother was diagnosed with cancer. We were very close and when she died, I couldn't handle the grief and I started using heroin. By then, I was married with six children. My wife pushed me to get help, but I was hooked.

I was burglarizing semi-trucks and doing any kind of crime that I could to feed my habit. By the time I was finally busted, I was mainlining three grams of heroin a day. I was like a madman — desperate and carrying a gun. My wife tried her best to stick with me and get me through it, but I was going down fast.

My partner in crime and I robbed a Safeway and were driving away when we hit a car that had FBI agents in it. The agents wanted to wait for the police instead of exchanging licenses. I told my partner to wait there and I walked two blocks down the street and robbed a Walgreens.

My crime partner wanted out of the life and she gave my name to the police and took them around to all the robberies we had done for the past five years. Soon after, dozens of police surrounded my apartment and I ended up with 44 different counts and got 20 years.

Looking back, it's unimaginable that I put my life and others at risk so many times. This was all connected to the five-year suicide mission I was

on after my mother died. I couldn't dig my way out of the grief and pain. I wanted to die.

Inside prison, I looked at everything I had done that got me there. Every day I'd write in my journal and I wrote letters to every one of my victims. I felt guilty about all the harm I had caused them and my family.

I was sent to Folsom State Prison, where they had regular shootings and riots. I tried to stay away from the gang rivalry by working 10 hours a day, six days a week in the print shop. I worked there six years before I was transferred to Solano, where I was trained on repairing small appliances.

I got out in 2001 and in 2007 one of my sons was murdered in a road-rage killing. I have been on both sides of this: I have hurt people and I lost my son to this same kind of madness. I was so angry and all this grief came up again. I eventually had to get counseling to help me deal with all the grief.

No one can do this for you. You have got to want to change your environment, change your friends, and change your criminal thinking. That's the only way you're going to make it. **If someone with a history like mine can change, so can you. ■**





“Whether I was on the inside or the outside, I didn’t feel worthy of living a regular life, but now my eyes are open to a different path.”

—Yema Lee



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