

VOICE

Fall-Winter 2018

REENTRY PROFILE

Pat Mims became the director of the Reentry Success Center in July 2018. In the first of two parts of his profile, he relates his connection to the formerly incarcerated community:

"When the judge sentenced me to 20 years to life in state prison, operated by the California Department of Corrections, I thought my life was over and I felt resolved that I would never see the streets again. Without giving it a thought, I said to myself, 'Oh well. It is what it is.'

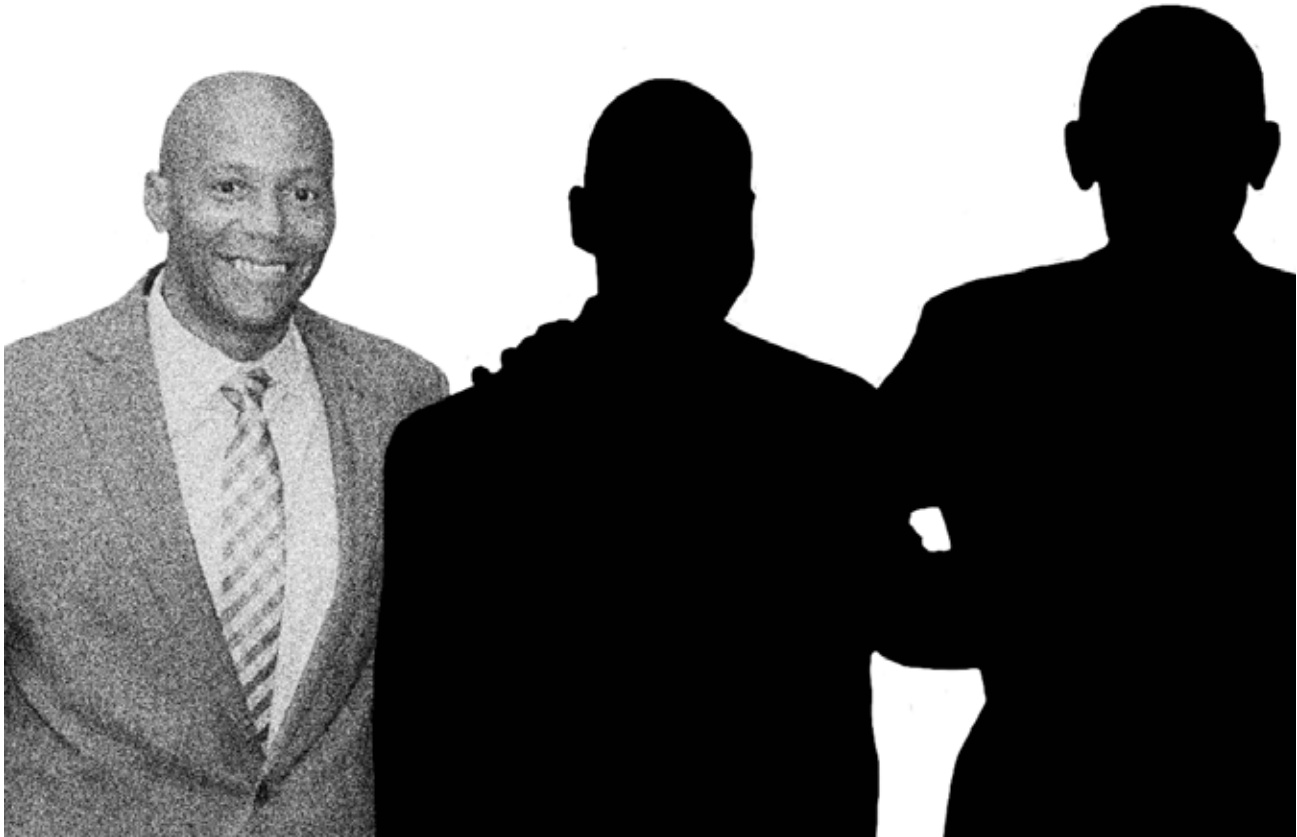
"I refused to reflect on the life I had taken, how many people I had harmed, my family that wanted nothing to do with me, and the community in which I was deemed a menace. Within my hopelessness, I could not imagine that faith would be my guide and two decades later transformation would lead to my freedom.

"I entered the prison system numb from the streets. I felt a total disconnect with what had happened to my life. The streets had taught me that being in prison was a part of life—a natural event—like what others viewed when going to college. So, when I arrived in prison, it was like hitting the streets again. I had no direction, no hope, and no thought about what was next. The hopelessness I felt kept me in a state of not caring about myself, despite my circumstances. I refused to reconnect with family, because I had totally disconnected from the outside world.

"Three years into my sentence, I received an unexpected visit. It was my father. He came to see how I was doing. As I sat with him that afternoon, he brought me up to speed on the lives of family, people we knew, and the events of the outside world. It was then when I realized something. I was sitting with him, having a normal conversation—without lies, ulterior motives, or a lack of understanding. At the end of his visit, I hugged him and promised I would write my mother.

"I walked across the yard of the 'Level 4' institution where I was housed and realized that this was the first time I had felt listened to and heard in years. The feeling of having had a normal conversation stayed with me for weeks, so much so that I began to question how I was living and how I wanted to live the rest of my life while in prison. Did I want to assimilate into the gangs, drugs, and violence? Or did I want to do better for myself and others?

"Just then, something snapped me out of my daydream. The alarm went off and shots were fired. I immediately got down and looked to make sure the incident that was happening was nowhere near me. From where I kneeled, I saw two people in a tangle. Guards came swiftly from every direction and removed them from the yard, followed by these words over the loud speaker: 'Resume normal program.' I found out later that the two men fighting had been arguing over a domino game. But the words, 'Resume normal



program,' stuck with me. If what I saw around me had become my normal program, I needed to make changes.

"I met with another inmate, a well-respected elder, out on the yard, and I told him my feelings of being tired of this mess and needing to make changes with my life. But how? The elder leaned over and said something that would become my mantra for the rest of my sentence. He said, 'If you stand for nothing, you will fall for anything.' The elder then asked if I had graduated from high school. I told him that I had not. I had dropped out in the ninth grade. He then pointed towards the

'Don't stop until you are finished.' The look in his eyes had me feeling it was an order, rather than a suggestion.

education building and said, 'You need to go over there. Don't stop until you are finished.' The look in his eyes had me feeling it was an order, rather than a suggestion.

"I took his advice and signed up for the General Education Development (GED) class. After months of reading, studying, writing, and learning, I felt empowered and in control of what was next. It was the first time I had ever felt that way. Hope had replaced hopelessness, and I felt motivated to pass the test. What's ironic is that I was serving a life sentence. I never thought about how the GED would help me in the future. I just wanted to do it for me.

"I passed the GED two years later and realized that I had become hungry for knowledge. I didn't want to stop attending the class, so I volunteered as a teacher's aide. I wanted others to experience the same feelings of accomplishment, empowerment, and hope that I had felt. As a teacher's aide, I helped my peers learn, and I witnessed

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them change for the better. It was my turning point: helping people, just like me, to find something positive in themselves. I realized we are not worthless, hopeless, nor anti-social. We are not animals.

"I'm sharing my story to remind those of you who are locked up, or have been locked up, that you are more than your crime. The crime does not have to define who you are. You can also be intelligent, funny, compassionate, and loving. What you do now and what you do next matters. There are also people on the outside working to make sure you receive the services to thrive in society. But, you must have faith that there is something better in store for you. I'm here to help you achieve it.

"Next issue, I'll share one of the highlights of my life after reentry, as seen in the picture above."

EDITORS' NOTES

Dear readers,

This issue is special: It's the first of four new print issues, which we hope will continue to challenge and inspire you in your journey. Here's a snapshot of what's inside: One of us shares a personal story of reentry; a valued member offers his story and real world wisdom; and three more stories highlight supports that are available to you.

From day one, our goal has been to offer guidance to get you home. 'Don't stop until you are finished.' 'Always look forward.' If there two things we hope you take away from this issue, it's these two pieces of advice.



Pat Mims
Reentry Success Center



Patrice Guillory
The Reentry Network

P.S. Not on our mailing list? Write us, and let us know where to send our newsletters to you.

Fast Eddie’s: Creating New Connections to Jobs

Fast Eddie’s Auto Service in Oakley is well-known and trusted, especially for growing numbers in the reentry population. Since 2013, the shop has been fixing cars, training people who are passionate about cars, and advancing people’s skills in the automotive industry. More recently, Fast Eddie’s technician training program has been assisting formerly incarcerated men and women to jump-start careers in the automotive industry and even help some get closer to owning their own business.

Fast Eddie’s owner Eddie Ibarra offers plenty of assistance. Earlier this year, Ibarra and his team launched a new Correspondence Program, which provides men and women the chance to get a head start on training to become a technician—while still behind bars.

"We felt there was a need," said Ibarra. "We saw [the Correspondence Program] as a way to connect with them while they’re there. Then, when they come out, they come straight into the [technician training] program, instead of getting released and trying to find themselves into the program."

The Correspondence Program is for men and women who are within six months of their release date. The technicians who lead the presentations often did time themselves. They tell their stories, offer tips, share where their lives are going, and

connect with those still doing time. A typical presentation brings in between 25-30 people.

"We start talking to them about getting them on the right track," Ibarra said.

Ibarra and his team talk often to men and

HERE’S WHAT HAPPENS

1. Every two weeks, Ibarra and his team give presentations at West County Detention Facility and Marsh Creek Detention Facility.
2. After their presentation, they ask people to sign up. Fast Eddie’s sends each interested person a curriculum packet. The packet includes reading material, tests, and questionnaires.
3. Once they’re done with one curriculum packet, they send the packet back to Fast Eddie’s, which then sends another curriculum packet to be completed. The process continues until they are released from the facility. After that, they continue their training on-site, at Fast Eddie’s Auto Service, and work towards passing the tests required for the certificate.

women reentering society, learn what they’re interested in, and connect them to services and organizations. His goal is to make them successful.

To Ibarra, everything is a partnership. He partners with Men and Women of Purpose to get the word out about his training program, and to gain people’s trust. Since Goodwill also works with the reentry population and is near his shop, he gives presentations there, too. He and his technicians sign people up on the spot. They are given materials on what to expect and are asked to commit to the requirements of the training program.

In 2019, Ibarra plans to open a new training center next to the shop, so classes can be held throughout the day--morning, midday, and afternoon--to serve more people. One day, he also would like to have a training facility in Marsh Creek, so once they are released, they already have a certificate and are ready to go to work. Students in the technical training program sometimes require 6-9 months of hands-on training before they are able to pass the test and receive their certificate. For men and women who served time, those 6-9 months are crucial. They need an income in order to pay rent and other needs. Ibarra is constantly looking for ways to shorten the time between release and when they can start earning a living.

"We want to invent a training program that’s unique and actually works," Ibarra said. "We know it has to be consistent, and we know it has to come from us. We’re not giving up. That’s kind of who we are."

Office of Reentry and Justice: Overseeing Plans

The Office of Reentry and Justice, known as "ORJ," is one of the newest government agencies in Contra Costa County. It officially launched in January 2017. The ORJ oversees much of the County’s reentry system, including the providers that serve the men and women reentering the community. The ORJ also conducts evaluations and keeps track of emerging issues, new research, and best practices.

The ORJ has three focus areas: Criminal Justice, Juvenile Justice, and Social Justice. Criminal Justice and Juvenile Justice are directly tied to the ORJ’s effort to build an effective reentry system for men, women, and their families. Social Justice promotes equitable access to opportunities and community resources.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Criminal Justice is the ORJ’s largest focus area, and it includes managing the services that make up the Countywide Reentry System. In East County and Central County, reentry services are provided by the Reentry Network. In West County, reentry services are provided by the Reentry Success Center. Both offer assistance on housing, employment, reunification with caregivers and loved ones, mentoring, and legal services. They are also the first stop for men and women coming home after a period of incarceration.

The ORJ is also responsible for other criminal justice programs, including:

Operation Ceasefire, a program to reduce gun violence in East County and Central County;

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ‘EQUALITY’ AND ‘EQUITY’

Equality, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, means the quality of being “of the same measure, quantity, amount, or number as another.” In practice, equality is helping everyone in the same way.

Equity, on the other hand, is defined as “justice according to natural law or right.” In practice, equity is providing the resources needed to achieve equal outcomes.

Imagine two people of different height standing on the floor. Their height is obviously not equal. However, that is a level field. Now imagine the shorter of the two standing on a wooden box, so they can see each other at eye level. That is equity.

Stepping Up, a program to reduce incarceration as a response to mental illness;

Smart Reentry, an East County program that seeks to minimize the number of formerly incarcerated young adults, ages 18-24, who end up back behind bars;

Pre-release Planning Initiative, a program that provides reentry planning and service coordination for all individuals incarcerated in the West County Detention Facility;

Community Capacity Building, a program to improve local organizations’ ability to provide effective, sustainable services to the reentry community.

The ORJ is also a key partner in running two additional programs: (1) the County’s Pretrial Services, which uses an evidence-based strategy to safely release individuals awaiting trial, without the use of money bail; and (2) CoCo LEAD Plus, which provides diversion, or intervention, as an alternative law enforcement response to low-level criminal behavior towards individuals with behavioral health issues in the City of Antioch.

JUVENILE JUSTICE

Although Juvenile Justice makes up a much smaller portion of the ORJ’s workload, it’s still an important focus area. The ORJ is managing the Youth Justice Initiative, which is piloting trauma training and alternate responses to misbehavior at an Antioch middle school. In addition, the ORJ has developed an integrated reentry approach to youth coming home from juvenile detention programs.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

The ORJ leads a number of social justice efforts, including:

Racial Justice Task Force, which seeks to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in the criminal and juvenile justice systems;

Government Alliance on Race and Equity, which is pursuing improvements in the outcomes of government decision-making;

Implicit Bias and Procedural Justice Training, which aims to help remove unintended prejudice and increase perceptions of fairness in the justice system.



Reentry Success Center: Guiding Transitions

One in three Americans has interacted with the criminal justice system at some point in their lives. It's more common than many think. This one event can be life-changing, introducing dozens of new barriers that can follow an individual throughout their life, making it more challenging to get a job, rent a home, or raise a child. That's where the Reentry Success Center in Richmond comes in.

The center awaits those reentering society with open arms and a steady hand. There, staff, volunteers, and fellow formerly incarcerated men and women work together to help others in the community transition to hold a good job, put a deposit on an apartment, and reconnect with friends and family.

"I was released from jail three weeks ago, after a ten month sentence, at the Detention Center," said a new member, who goes by Michelle. "This place was talked about a lot while I was there. I heard so many success stories, so I came here first."

Michelle said she knew she needed a support network to get back on her feet.

"In jail, we don't have to talk to each other," she said. "You are isolated. You push people away. But you have to work together to move forward in the community. We're uninformed about our rights. We don't have the direction or structure to do what we need to yet."

LIFE SKILLS AND JOB SUPPORT

At the center, she found the guidance she was looking for. She signed up for classes including a life skills course, a cognitive skills class, and trauma and grief therapy sessions. Those opportunities have helped her adjust to the working world and manage some of the challenges in her personal life.

"My son tells me that I need to communicate better," she said, "so for now, I'm focusing on that. I'm also working to collect some of the skills I need to thrive in my career."

Another priority is learning how to navigate the job search process with a criminal record.

"It's hard to find a good job or start a career," Michelle said. "There are many obstacles. Some employers look at me like a criminal. They put me in a box."

Luckily, changes to California's employment laws have made things a bit easier for Michelle and countless others to have a fair chance.

Assembly Bill 1008, or "Ban the Box" legislation signed by Governor Jerry Brown

in 2017, became law after a coalition of formerly incarcerated advocates came together to push for change. Under the new law, employers are no longer allowed to ask about an applicant's criminal background until the interview process, allowing people to show who they really are without preconceived notions and prejudices clouding the employer's judgement.

"This allows people to sell themselves," said Lawrence Robinson, the center's volunteer mentor coordinator. "The law has already helped

It's been documented that what happens in the first 72 hours after release has the greatest impact on whether an individual recidivates. That time frame is critical. You either go to a shelter, go home to your family, or you fall back in with the 'homies' who got you into jail in the first place.

some employers see the light. Now, there are many so-called 'felon-friendly' employers out there."

Getting a job can still be a challenge though, but those challenges are often overcome with hard work and dedication.

"Many people have no job history and no references," Robinson said, "so we try to take the skills they've learned on the street and apply them to today's job market."

Robinson recruits and manages volunteers and mentors who help participants build new careers—and lives. He has seen many of his friends, family, and colleagues go in and out of the criminal justice system. He knows firsthand what they have to do to succeed.

"It's been documented that what happens in the first 72 hours after release has the greatest impact on whether an individual recidivates," he said. "That time frame is critical. You either go to a shelter, go home to your family, or you fall back in with the 'homies' who got you into jail in the first place. That's why housing and community support go hand-in-hand during the reentry process."

Robinson said the center is fortunate to have a relationship with the county probation department. That department often brings newly released men and women to the Center, so they can get the resources they want and avoid relapsing into old behaviors.

HOUSING SUPPORT

Having a stable home makes a world of difference. Richmond now outlaws discrimination against potential renters who have a criminal record. That law increases access to housing, which in turn makes it easier for formerly incarcerated men and women to get and keep their job.

"When you first come home, you often stay at a shelter and get a temp job," Robinson said. "But soon enough, you find out your shelter has a residency cap: 30 days. How can potential employers contact you if you're bouncing back and forth without a phone or mailing address?"

Few know that better than a participant, who goes by Tommy. He recently completed the center's eight-week Alpha Program.

"I've been living in shelters so that I can save my wages for a deposit," he said. "Now, I'm in the process of looking for a studio in Richmond."

Tommy said the Alpha Program changed his life, and helped to make jobs and housing accessible. After nearly a decade in incarceration he knew there had to be a better way.

"I learned to reenter home life and work life," he said. "Then, I got a full-time job, just one month after Alpha. It gave me a second chance at a first-class life. Being told what to do, when to eat...letting someone take control of your life... it's no way to live. I robbed myself of so many opportunities to advance and be happy. But now, I feel different. I look different. I talk different. I'm out of the unemployment line, and that feels great."

Tommy connected most of his success to the people he has kept around him.

"I always had emotional support from my family," he says. "But the center had my back. They told me I don't have to go into this alone, and they stayed by my side."



EVENTS

MONDAYS (ONGOING)

Bridges to Work

9-11am, job-readiness services, open to men and women in East and Central County, Goodwill Industries, 3350 Clayton Road, Suite 100, Concord

TUESDAYS (ONGOING)

Women's Support Group/Girl Talk

5:30-7:30pm, Rubicon Programs, 418 West 4th Street, Antioch

WEDNESDAYS (ONGOING)

Men's Support Group

5:30-7:30pm, Rubicon Programs, 418 West 4th Street, Antioch

THURSDAYS (ONGOING)

LGBT Wellness Recovery Action Plan

1-2:15pm, free community workshop to develop skills to manage anxiety and stress, Rainbow Community Center, 2118 Willow Pass Road, Suite 500, Concord

REMEDY Support Group

5-7:30pm, women and men, 18 and over, at risk for chronic illness; first and third Thursdays at West County Health Clinic, 13601 San Pablo Ave, San Pablo; second and fourth Thursdays at Pittsburg Health Center, 2311 Loveridge Road, Pittsburg

Forward Thinking

5:30-7:30pm, men's support group, Reentry Success Center, 912 Macdonald Avenue, Richmond

FIRST & THIRD TUESDAY (ONGOING)

HIV/AIDS East County Support Group

Men and women, 18 and over, Community Presbyterian Church, 200 East Leland Road, Pittsburg

FIRST & THIRD TUESDAY (ONGOING)

Reentry Orientation

10am-12pm, employment, housing, health and other assistance, Reentry Success Center, 912 Macdonald Ave, Richmond

FIRST & THIRD FRIDAY (ONGOING)

Debtor's Rights Clinic

9:30am-1pm, debt collection lawsuit and harassment support, (first Friday) SparkPoint-Contra Costa West, 1000 Macdonald Ave, Richmond and (third Friday) SparkPoint-Contra Costa East, 3105 Willow Pass Road, Bay Point

LAST THURSDAY (ONGOING)

"Reentry: The BIGGER Picture" Workshop

6-8pm, hosted by the Reentry Network at HealthRight 360, 5119 Lone Tree Way, Antioch

REENTRY PROFILE



JP has a saying that helps him focus: "Once you get a win, you can't sit down. You gotta keep moving."

"My first connection with the Reentry Network was in June 2017. Since that time, I've taken advantage of any and all resources offered to me. The Network's goal of connecting people like me with needed supports can be challenging at times. But, with their support, I made sure all my connections were made and all my benefits were accessed. My motivation to succeed was never questioned.

"From the beginning, I had my eye out for the next opportunity. I appreciate each and every success, but I'm always looking forward. While at Goodwill's Bridges to Work program, I saw a flyer for HAZWOPER training. HAZWOPER stands for Hazardous Waste and Emergency Response. This training certifies participants to work around hazardous materials.

"Not only did I enroll and complete the training, I also coordinated transportation and housing for myself and another participant. The HAZWOPER certification was an important key for my future employment. This certification was needed for the Santa Rosa Fire cleanup. This job was also a marked jump in pay and prestige from my last job at Goodwill. Soon after I started, I was put in a leadership role. I became a crew leader. I had to push myself to get this job.

"Even though the pay is good, I didn't lose sight of my other goals. I deferred taking this job to attend a five-week Teamster's training near Sacramento. It was another resource I could mine. I was able to get the cost of the training waived through the probation referral to job development services. At the end of the training, I received my Class A license and became a union

driver. During those five weeks, I persevered while I also looked for housing. I committed to making the daily commute from Central County to Sacramento to attend those classes. Recently, I went back to Sacramento for another training, this time to be able to operate heavy equipment.

From the beginning, I had my eye out for the next opportunity. I appreciate each success, but I'm always looking forward.

"I'm not only motivated for my success, but for those who are reentering society from time spent locked up. I'm determined to pass on information about all available resources to those I meet in support groups, job sites, and work programs. Helping others with a new beginning is important to me. Helping those who have made wrong choices and ended up in prison is important, as well. I have a story to share with anyone who wants to listen and learn, and hopefully avoid the path I took.

"I'm smart, but because I lacked guidance, love, direction, and made poor decisions in my early years, I was pulled in a negative direction. After years of struggling about who I am, I believe I've turned the corner. I'm making better choices, taking on more responsibility, and being accountable to myself. My desire is to come alongside others and help them pursue their goals to better themselves and play positive roles in their communities."

GAMES

Fill in the blank squares, so each row, each column, and each block contain all digits 1 thru 9. Answers will be in the next issue.

CURRENT ISSUE

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ANSWERS TO THE PREVIOUS ISSUE

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Contra Costa Reentry VOICE is published quarterly by the following organizations:



Reentry Success Center
912 Macdonald Avenue
Richmond, CA 94801
reentrysuccess.org



Reentry Network at HealthRight 360
5119 Lone Tree Way
Antioch, CA 94531
healthRIGHT360.org



Contra Costa County
30 Muir Road
Martinez, CA 94553
co.contra-costa.ca.us

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