

Center for Employment Opportunities

GOODBYE TO GANG LIFE AND PRISON

Pablo Ramirez was impressed when he met Mike Price at the Donovan State Correctional Facility in San Diego, CA. Pablo was a re-entry instructor and Mike a 23-year-old inmate in his life skills class. Unlike Pablo's other students, most of whom would stumble into class or not show up at all, "Mike would be waiting for me at the door with a folder under his arm," Ramirez remembers. "He was always friendly, he had a big smile. He used to tell me how much he missed his son."

Pablo had been working at the prison for four years and the tension inside its walls was wearing him down. When he was contacted about a new job working for the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO), a New York-based nonprofit expanding to San Diego, he did some research and learned that CEO's mission is to provide immediate and lasting employment for men and women coming out of incarceration.

Pablo interviewed for the job and became CEO San Diego's first Job Coach and Life Skills Instructor. Before he left Donovan, he made sure to tell Mike about his new job and invited him to get in touch when he was released.

Mike Price's girlfriend Emma was pregnant when he went to juvenile hall in 2007. Neither one of them wanted an abortion despite the fact that Emma already had four children and Mike was only 17. Emma wasn't allowed to visit Mike because she wasn't family, but he kept close tabs on her pregnancy with frequent phone conversations. After his aunt went to court several times to appeal his case, the authorities finally relented, sending Mike home with a tracking bracelet on his ankle just as Emma was coming to term. He was there when Mike Jr. was born, instantly falling in love.

Now 18, Mike found a job in a shipyard and things went well for a while. But there was temptation, too. Mike, a longtime gang member, began spending too much time with his

Bloods brothers. He lost his job and began dealing crack cocaine because he “couldn’t stand to see Mike Jr. be deprived of anything.”

One night Mike took his young son to what he thought would be a routine drug deal when things went bad. Standing behind his car door and careful to shield the one-year-old, he exchanged gunfire with the rival Crips. Shot in the ear, he was rushed to the hospital at the same time he was booked for possession and assault with a firearm. Sentenced to 18 months, and 18 more for other violations, he was held at Donovan for three years. Released, he was overjoyed to see Mike Jr., but with no job on the horizon, he went back to dealing and then to prison for an additional year on a parole violation.

Crushed to be separated from his son again, Mike resolved to make this prison stay his last. “Who wants to sit in prison and be away from family?” he asks. “I looked back at my life, and I saw that all the fighting had been about dumb stuff. I don’t understand a lot of the things I did or why I did them. I had no control over my life.”

Mike began frequenting the prison library, attracted to psychology books in order to understand himself better. “I went from trying to be a tough guy to self-educating,” he explains. “Prison don’t teach you nothing. They don’t have no more classes. You can’t learn trades. You have to do it yourself.”

Pablo Ramirez was thrilled when Mike Price applied for the CEO program. When Mike began attending classes, Retention Specialist Bruce Lowe saw what Pablo had been talking about, and was hopeful he would succeed.

“There are many reasons why program participants can fail,” Lowe says. “A guy who sells drugs can make enough money to sustain his life, buy some nice cars, some nice clothes, always have cash in his pocket. The lifestyle is ideal for these guys, especially when they come from poverty backgrounds. By contrast, here at CEO, they’d be making \$50 a day for transitional jobs on work crews that build experience and help them secure full-time, permanent positions.

“And you have to remember, most of these guys coming out of prison won’t be able to get jobs on the outside. It’s very easy for those who have the connections to go back to their old lives, and the gang doesn’t necessarily want you to do right. They need soldiers out in the street.... They’re going to do everything they can to stop you from going straight.”

“Please try on your boots. If they don’t fit and you wear them, you’ll have to buy your next pair.” Pablo was teaching the last day of a life skills education class required for new CEO recruits. He’d just distributed shiny new work boots to six young men, including Mike. The past four days had imparted many lessons about how to perform on CEO’s transitional work crews, where the boots would be worn. There was also instruction on interview techniques: How to dress, what words to avoid (i.e., *addiction*), and how to describe prison time to best advantage (*I made some poor choices in the past. Now I’m focusing on a positive future*).

Explains Bruce Lowe: “We concentrate on job-searching skills, how to set up an interview, what time to call for a job, what day of the week is best to drop off an application. And we talk about goals, short-term and long-term. Where do you see yourself in two or three years, how will you get there? And once you get a job, how do you behave?”

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When the fourth class was over, the graduates were called up to receive their certificates. All the CEO staff was on hand, and everyone clapped and whistled when Mike's name was called.

A week later, Mike began traveling by van to join a CEO work crew at a job site. "Work crews give the participants some sort of income to bridge the gap between unemployed and employed full-time," says Lowe of the program, sponsored in partnership with the city of Chula Vista, which assigns work crews various public works tasks, such as landscaping and maintaining parks and open spaces. "It gives them practical work experience. They have to report here at 6:30 AM, we take roll, we load them up in a van. A lot of these guys come in not wanting to be told what to do. They have to get used to supervisors who won't necessarily be so nice to them."

To show their support, the supervisors work alongside the crew members. "I get in those canyons and come back just as dirty as they are at the end of the day," Lowe smiles. "That's how I know Mike so well. Because that's when we talked."

Much of it is about teamwork. "When five men have to pick up one big log and you have to depend on these guys not to drop it, you learn to put trust in other people," Lowe says. "In prison, they need permission from the OG's (Original Gangsters) to do just about anything. If they don't do what's expected of them, something bad can happen. Out here, there can be more of a brotherhood."

Meanwhile, CEO employment counselors back at the office worked hard pursuing permanent job leads. They also conducted mock job interviews, for which Mike showed up in the required suit and tie. "They're really out there for you," says Mike. "Every day, talking to managers around town. There's a lot of energy."

In February 2013, within just two weeks of beginning the work training program, Mike secured a job in a warehouse with Las Vegas-LA Express, a retail distribution and freight service. "I started out working three days a week, and now it's five or six days," Mike explained. "There's not a lot of benefits, it's like a stepping stone, but it's helping me get on my feet."

As he does with all participants, Bruce Lowe stays in touch with Mike. "If they have any issues, need housing resources or the like, I make sure to get them in contact with the right source," Lowe says, explaining that CEO also provides motivation for "graduates" to stay employed with a "Rapid Rewards" program that awards up to \$500 to participants who bring in pay stubs every month to verify their employment.

Mike was excited as he awaited the birth of his second child — with girlfriend Diondra, the daughter of a police captain in Oceanside. He was happy to get up every morning at 4:00 AM, returning home at 7:30 PM. On his days off, he spent as much time as possible with Mike Jr., and he filed in court to win full custody of the child.

"I credit CEO for everything right now," Mike said. "That's the only reason I have a job, the only reason I'm living comfortable. Otherwise I'd be back in prison or I'd be selling drugs again, or trying to rob something....CEO gave me a new life."

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