

TaJuan Chester P-23137  
(Essay)  
Words Uncaged

## Report: Graduation AVP-CGA

Today I was able to attend a graduation for the Alternatives to Violence Program (AVP), and the New Choices Different Directions, here at CSP-LAC on A-Yard. Although I have successfully taken and graduated from both programs, I was not there as a graduating member. I was present in support of the graduating members, the Facilitators, and Sponsor who worked towards a common goal of bettering themselves and the community that we live in.

Sitting in the visiting room with these men, these graduates, and their families, who were looking at their sons, brothers, husbands, and fathers with a type of humble pride that reminds me of my experience of graduating from AVP not too long ago, and how my family looked upon me with that same type of humble pride. My experience in prison, is that this is one of the few moments that our families could witness us doing something extremely positive in prison, and for some of us, our entire lives. It is truly a beautiful experience for us, and the people who have helped and played a role for prisoners, to be more human.

So, on that special day made even more so, because we had upper Administration in attendance. Notably, Community Resource Manager Erica Lake, Assistant Warden Lewandowski, and sergeant Schumacher, who had facilitated the rehabilitation, in C.D.C.R. for us. It is a semi-formal and momentous occasion for those who are here. It is evident that the work that these men put in on themselves to become better people and thereby effecting our community in such a positive way, that we prisoners didn't know was possible.

The love and goodness that we project can be limitless. These classes teach us that, but this event that shows those of us, with little faith in our own abilities, that we can make a difference and not to start when we get out with our positive transformation, but to do it now. Effect your community in a positive way now, wherever you are, in prison, the SHU, even Death Row. Do whatever you can to be the light, within "The Darkness." Speaking from my own experience, these types of events are humbling and feels like acknowledgement from the community that we, who were lost within our own selfish worlds, are doing the right thing now, and to continue.

Going from student to Facilitator is the natural progression for most of us, who are doing the inner work on ourselves. But this Facilitator, was the catalyst for N.C.D.D. coming to A-Yard. It is through his own efforts, that we have a self-help class, that addresses the criminal and gang mentality.

Donald Green, J-50400:

Men for Honor has provided many different opportunities for me, that I was not getting at any other Institution. If I remember well, the very first class I took was the, "Lifer's Guidance Class." This class gave me insight into what are the Board requirements, to obtain my freedom. At first, I was taking these classes for the Board, however, I came to my senses that, I had to understand myself, and why I became the person whom I'd become. I had to better myself. I had to understand my causative factors to why I became that person. I had to understand the impact of my actions. I had to understand where I went wrong in my life, and the destructive lifestyle that took me, and to find a better way of life. Being involved in the "Lifer's Guidance Class," helped me to first start the process of "Healing," and began to forgive myself, from the abuse that was laid upon me as a child. The hurt, the pain, the suffering that I went through, as a child, was not my fault. I had to understand that my past was the past. I had to accept all aspects of the past, in order for me to grow and understand me. Today, I stand proud to be a member of "Men For Honor," and to be one of their Facilitators, of the group "New Choices Different Directions." Men For Honor, has allowed me to bring this group/class to this Facility, to help myself, and other individuals, to understand more about the destructive lifestyles we lived, and to put this addictive lifestyle in remission.

New Choices has helped me to abandon all gang activities! Also, to help me abstain from all criminal activities. New Choices has helped me to understand the dynamics of gangs, and why I became involved in gang activities.

Thank you "Men For Honor," for allowing me, and others like me, to find the humanity within us.

To me, what is really cathartic, is the positive impact we fellow prisoners have on each other, when we talk to one another about how we each became broken. I remember sitting in the N.C.D.D. Class full of trepidation, wondering how best to proceed, and at the head of the class two Facilitators, one spoke up, named Michael. I would like to describe Michael as being polished. He was articulate, in tune with his feelings, and his delivery was intimidating to me; because I did not know how I could go from my warped way of thinking to someone like Michael, who exuded a healthy, and balanced thought process. Then Donald spoke; it was like night and day. Donald stammered, and stumbled over his own words, but he spoke a truth, that gave me clarity. Donald said, "The criminal mind-set, and gang lifestyle is an addiction, but we don't have to succumb to our addictions. By working the steps to recovery, we can regain our humanity." Seeing the contrast from one Facilitator to another; connected to dots for me, and helped me understand. I always remind myself that a person's transition may not be as perfect as we would like. If Michael's transition was

perfect and flawless, like a humming bird, in flight, checking off each box, as he makes his transition (turning point, gaining the ability to have remorse, learning to empathize for others, etc.). Zooming to these metaphorical flowers, as he completed his change into someone, you would not mind living next door to in society, I would describe Donald as one of those fat, drone, bumble bees, crashing into walls, and landing less than gracefully. However; he eventually collects all of his pollen, because Donald, like that drone bumble bee, is determined to do what is intuitively right.

Some of the graduates here have multiple family members in attendance, like Lamar Nelson (G-06794). He is serving a lengthy life sentence, but has focused his attention on becoming a better father, husband, and person. When I asked him, “What does it feel like to be acknowledged for his contributions, in front of his family?” He stated:

“CDCR has been known for its harsh and discouraging path, to family reunification in spite of its advertised family policies, dealing with positive growth. Today, at a self-help graduation, at CSP-LAC on the A-Yard Progressive Programming Facility (PPF), my wife and daughter were afforded the rare opportunity to experience some encouraging advice, and positive inspiration. This was new to them, yet to be a part of this positive and different approach, helped to solidify the reasons they continue to support me.”

This situation has not been easy, yet the love our families have for us, is beyond recognition. The experience of acknowledging our struggles and our transformation into a positive area of life, filled with compassion, growth, and maturity, has created a sense of worth, and pride for those 3who continue to support and care for us. To hear people, such as Ms. Marion speaking highly of us, as human beings, with love, was very uplifting. To have Ms. Bayless show and express love and compassion, to the point of tears, really touched everyone’s family, and gave the feeling of gratification to their sacrifices, and to our progress. To watch our families, who have supported us, through all of the discouragement and negative encounters, finally see and experience such a proud, positive, productive, and encouraging program, was truly remarkable. It is easy to get caught up in this environment, with all of the negative policies and criticism, so to have an organization acknowledge our struggles, our positive growth, and our transformation, not only strengthens us, but strengthens our families bond as well.

I would like to truly thank all those responsible for this event, and those who participated in this event, for the positive experience. Our families are very appreciative for the opportunity to witness positive results, and to share a path, to healing and bonding.

I think of one of the most important aspects of the graduation ceremony, for us prisoners here at CSP-LAC, is that we are afforded an opportunity to share this experience with our families, whom we owe immeasurable thanks to, and for those of us who facilitate and sponsor a self-help group. It gives us a tremendous chance to reach into our community, and to help those who need it the most. Whether it is through fund raising, for a charitable organization that helps others, or working the N.C.D.D. steps to recovery, and “freely sharing our truth and experiences with others like us,” so that other prisoners can connect the dots and find the path of recovery of their own.

Sincerely,

TaJuan Chester (P-23137)  
Former Addict of Illegal Activities,  
And Ex-Gang Member