

Youth Changes His Life by Helping Other Kids

A year ago, the story of seventeen year-old Luis' [last name withheld to maintain his confidentiality] life was typical of that of many high-risk kids who are vulnerable to the pull of gang involvement and street violence. Now he is a model of positive leadership, helping younger children avoid the mistakes he made.

His story shows how re-connecting a youth to the community in positive ways can change the direction of a child's life.

Luis had been a straight A student until he changed high schools when his family moved. Needing to make new friends, Luis found it hard to resist the appeals of gang members who offered the promise of friendship and respect. Luis quickly discovered how false that promise was, after he was charged with Attempted Murder and Assault, following a confrontation with a group of rival youths that resulted in a stabbing. These charges were Measure 11 offenses, meaning that Luis faced the prospect of being tried in adult court and sentenced to a long, mandatory prison term.

While awaiting his court proceedings, Luis was held at the county's juvenile detention facility for five weeks. While he was there, he read as much as he could and began to reflect on his choices. Later, he pleaded guilty to an assault charge and was sentenced to adult probation and community service.

Kym Carmichael is a family advocate with the county's Embrace project, a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-funded initiative designed to improve access to services for youth who are in trouble with the law. According to Kym, Luis "soaked up as much of the services that we could provide" – services that helped him turn his life around.

Luis was directed to attend DCJ's GOALS program, which holds youth accountable through community service and builds their skills so they can avoid future criminal involvement. In GOALS, Luis acquired conflict resolution and other skills necessary to succeed in life, while fulfilling his community service obligations.

Working with Luis' adult probation officer, Lisa Lewis, Kym helped arrange for Luis to complete a portion of his community service mentoring 5th graders through the I Have a Dream foundation. Luis read to the students, helped them with math problems, played basketball with them and even worked with them to build a model volcano as part of a science project. Both the kids that Luis



has worked with and the staff at the I Have a Dream program were deeply impressed with Luis' commitment, enthusiasm and his positive message for younger and impressionable children.

Luis also takes part in Embrace's youth leadership group, which Kym organized to give youth who were in the justice system a voice in how the system operates. Wanting to help other kids learn a lesson from their experience, Luis and the other leadership group participants put together a proposal to go into school classrooms to educate youth about the serious criminal consequences youth can face when they get into trouble.

Talking about his experience on probation, Luis says, "It's a good thing I found people who really care about kids." Today, Luis says "I don't dress the same, I don't drink anymore. I don't do drugs anymore."

Expelled after his arrest, Luis returned to school this fall. After he graduates, he wants to attend college and become a businessman. In the meantime, he has also asked his probation officer how he can have his gang tattoo removed.

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