

How I Used My Second Chance

By JEREMY ESTRADA

I was only 12 when Rudy died in my arms, the victim of a stabbing by six rival gang members. Rudy was my neighbor, my best friend, my companion. After he died, I turned to his gang for solace. I lost all interest in school and had an almost uncontrollable urge to fight. During one fight, I beat a boy so badly that he was hospitalized with internal bleeding to his brain. This vicious assault led to my first criminal charges. But with no treatment for my anger, I continued to act out in increasingly violent ways.

Eventually, I landed in the juvenile detention center and from there was sent to a group home for a year and a half. After release, I "re-offended" and was sent to a youth camp for another six months. Although I learned job skills, I still had not been given any treatment for my anger.

This time when I was released, my gang was in the midst of a war. Several of my friends had been killed and I got a gun, plan-

ning to avenge their deaths. Before I had the chance, my stepmother found the gun and called the police.

I thought I was headed for prison. But the juvenile court gave me a last chance, sending me to Rite of Passage, a wilderness challenge program, tucked away in the Nevada desert. Something clicked out in the desert. A teacher taught me how to do fractions, working with me until I mastered the math. This dedicated teacher renewed my dormant interest in education. Soon, I expanded my horizons, writing essays, studying politics and government.

My counselor encouraged me to go to college and assisted me with the paperwork and financial aid applications. Two days after being released from Rite of Passage, I was a college student.

I never looked back. Studying hard, I earned straight As in two years at Lassen Junior College and was elected president of the Hispanic Student Assn. I transferred to Pepperdine University, will soon graduate, and plan to attend medical school. I continue to mentor youth in Rite of Passage and recently spoke at an international conference on juvenile justice held in Poland.

No matter what I do, I can never forget where I came from. I feel obligated to tell my story to other young people in similar circumstances.

But today, kids like me may not get the second chance they need. Federal legislation is being considered that would give prosecutors nonreviewable discretion

over whom to try as adults, would relax the prohibitions against housing teenagers with adults in jails and prisons, and would eliminate the confidentiality of juvenile court records, making them available to law enforcement and school officials, including college admissions officers.

If I had been tried as an adult rather than given a chance (indeed, many chances) to work through my anger, I doubt I'd be here today. If I had been housed in an adult prison, instead of being sent to a place with caring and committed counselors, my passion for education would never have been discovered. I'm sure I would have only gotten deeper into the gang life.

If universities are allowed access to juvenile court records, I fear that kids will never get the chance to outgrow their pasts. Pepperdine knew of my troubled past because I made the choice to disclose it, not because my records were automatically sent to the university.

I was speaking publicly about my experiences and a scout from the school heard me and invited me to apply. He had the wisdom to look beyond my transgressions and see me for who I had become. I'm not sure other college admissions officers would be so enlightened. If they had seen my records first, my opportunity to go to Pepperdine might have been stolen, and my life, which now includes a beautiful wife and daughter, would not look so promising.

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