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Project Rebound student Joseph Cruz shares his story

By Alec Calvillo

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(Alec Calvillo / Daily Titan)

Joseph Cruz hit rock bottom when he was incarcerated at the age of 18 and was sentenced with 30 years to life. But while he was incarcerated, he rediscovered his passion for education and developed a love for mentoring younger inmates. Cruz is one of the newest scholars in Cal State Fullerton's [Project Rebound](#), a philanthropically-funded program that helps guide formerly incarcerated students through higher education. CSUF adopted the program in 2016 and is one of eight CSU campuses to do so.

He joined this semester when he was told it was expanding to more colleges.

“Education became a main focal point for me. I tried to get these guys to understand that education is what was gonna help them in life. Not just hanging out with the homies and being on the yard,” Cruz said.

After he was released on May 17, Cruz wasted no time enrolling in college. While incarcerated, he obtained around 120 units and had a 3.7 GPA.

Cruz always had an affinity for education. With his advanced learning skills, he was able to pass junior high in one year, but he later struggled to stay focused in high school. It wasn't until he was incarcerated that his ambition for school and learning returned.

“I wanted to stay in school. School kept me out of trouble and a lot of the stuff that was going on in prison. It became my escape,” Cruz said.

Through the college education system in prison, Cruz was only allowed to earn an associate degree. It was there that he earned two associate degrees, one in sociology and another in social and behavioral science.

While taking classes, he and his friends would use the same competitive nature instilled in prison to do well in school.

“It became a competition with us. We were competing with our grades, we were competing with classes we were taking,” Cruz said.

Cruz also used his experiences to help other younger inmates. He became a part of a prison program that worked with inmates who were 21 and under.

He said it was a challenge to recruit young inmates into the program before gangs recruited them. Cruz would encourage the younger inmates to pursue education and help some of them with tutoring.

“I did it because I wanted to make my environment better and because I don't want to see these people go through the things that I had to go through when I first got incarcerated. You actually want to help them and show them that there is a better way of life,” Cruz said.

Cruz decided to come to CSUF because he heard many good things about the school from staff members at his work who graduated from CSUF and lived in the area.

“I honestly can say that I've felt so embraced being here,” Cruz said. “Cal State Fullerton really works with Project Rebound.”

Romarilyn Ralston, Project Rebound coordinator, welcomed Cruz into the program after noticing that he was determined to finish his education. She described him as a deep thinker and intellectual who is always looking for an opportunity to help other people.

“When you’re a lifer in a prison, waiting for your parole date or trying to get out through the court, you have to really have some self-determination. He made it out and still had such a great attitude and outlook on life,” Ralston said.

Cruz surrounded himself with other Project Rebound students when he needed help understanding and using the CSUF portal. Ginny Oshiro is one of the Project Rebound students who Cruz often interacts with.

Oshiro said the first time she met Cruz, he wasn’t able to contact Project Rebound because of a phone issue, so he came in by himself. She said she was impressed by his desire to pursue a higher education.

“Joseph is extremely smart. He’s super helpful. Sometimes I forget that this is still new for him because he makes it appear easy to be a part of whatever we’re doing,” Oshiro said.

Cruz said he believes there are others like him who are willing to change. He said those who have changed and are willing to comply with the law should be given a second chance.

“I want my friends to be able to experience what I’m experiencing,” Cruz said. “I sat in a cell for 23 years and I waited every day for this day.”