FROM THE BIG HOUSE TO THE IVY COVERED HALLS

Pursuing Education After Prison

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AMIDST A LECTURE hall of chatting, anxious students on the first day of a new quarter, Oscar Soto sits in the first row and waits for Storke to chime in a new hour. When the buzz dies down, Soto approaches the front of the classroom and introduces himself as the professor. People are shocked—some laugh, others glance with a skeptical eye. Casually dressed in a pair of jeans, a graphic-printed sweatshirt, finished with a baseball cap, Soto doesn't strike students as a typical sociology graduate student and instructor. He wasn't always focused on entering the academic realm. Life wasn't all about higher education for Soto. In fact, he only started to pursue higher education after spending two years in and out of prison.

Soto grew up in Valley Center, a farmer-industry town near San Diego with a predominantly undocumented community. With occasional conflict at home, Soto began translating his angry emotions into school life. At school, Soto became involved in the tension between two racially-segregated groups. "Chicanos would fight with the Native Americans," he said. "We saw it as defending ourselves and defending our homies against a different group of homies. It was just mutual hatred against each other."

When Soto recalls his experiences with early education, he says that the system deliberately pushed him out. In an institution meant to set children up to succeed, he found himself failing. "Once I got into high school, my grades started plummeting," he said. Although he was excelling in his subjects before, Soto was placed in an English as a Second Language class where they would watch Disney movies, read *Cat in the Hat* books, and practice their handwriting. "I was thinking, 'This class is chillin'—I'm going to just watch a movie and kick it with the homies.' Sometimes we'd ditch and smoke weed," he said. "I never thought about it as a structural issue. I never thought, 'Oh shit, people are pushing me out.'"

Oscar Soto at work in his office

> "Yeah, I'm incarcerated. So what?"

Soto experienced his first encounter with law enforcement in 2008. Over the next two years, he spent time in and out of jail as a result of two felonies and eight misdemeanor charges. "I'd have a court date and they'd arrest me," he said. "Then I'd get out and have another court date and they'd arrest me and say, 'We're adding more charges,' and kept putting me in and out."

Some people strive for jail time as a mark of manhood, according to Soto. But it was different for him. "For me, I wanted to be with my family," he said. "I didn't want to go back to jail." After being released for the final time, Soto was required to go back to school in accordance with his probation terms.

Enrolled in a community college, Soto struggled with his grades and motivation, until he met Dr. Juan Santos, a sociology professor who Soto could relate to. This was his turning point. "When you have mentors, when you have people that look like you, when you have someone that comes from the same background, you're like, 'Oh shit–maybe I can do it,"' he said. "He had a different perspective. I started to say, 'I should start fighting for my community instead of just fighting for my survival."' After attending community college, Soto finished his undergraduate studies in Psychology at CSU San Marcos.

For English graduate student Clint Terrell, education had merely seemed like an unattainable concept. But after prison, it was also an experience with a professor that pushed him to go beyond what he thought he was academically capable of after being incarcerated for three years. While finishing his undergraduate education at UC Berkeley, Terrell met Jeffery O'Brien, a professor that offered to work with him and evened out the playing field by mentoring and guiding him to pursue a career. O'Brien directed him towards academic opportunities and provided hands-on support with schoolwork.

Like Soto, Terrell grew up in a community where education wasn't a given priority. Instead, he faced a drug-and-alcohol-impacted home where domestic violence and fighting were the norms. Education was never on Terrell's radar, as there were no role models at home to push him in the right academic direction. "My parents would punish me and scream at me for messing up in school. But my mom dropped out of high school in tenth grade, so she wasn't in a position to help me," he said. "It was always instilled in me that you go to school for class mobility—you go to be a doctor or lawyer and be rich, but we didn't have any of that capital. All I saw around me was just chaos—fighting, drug use, knock-down-dragged-out fights between my mom and whoever she was dating at the time, cops showing up at the house, and shit getting thrown at the windows."

Terrell's actions reflected those around him, and he soon found his way into a juvenile hall. When Terrell was 14 years old he was charged with burglary and drug possession, and he transferred in and out of juvenile hall until he turned 18. Juvenile hall offered little academically, and its educational program was far from a stimulating experience. Instead, inmates were assigned packets for each subject for a certain amount of units

Clint Terrell on campus at UCSB

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that would count as credit in a regular high school.

Terrell found himself just choosing the ones that he thought were interesting—often completing humanities over math and science. “By the time I turned 17, I had a certain amount of units in one subject and no units in another subject—so my units were really messed up by the time I got into a regular high school,” he said. While his peers finished up their senior courses, Terrell juggled his imbalanced course load. “The teachers didn’t know what to do with me because my units were all over the place,” he said. “I was in some freshman classes and some senior classes. I was like, ‘I’m never going to graduate. This is stupid.’”

In 2005, Terrell was sentenced to four years in prison with half-time, which meant that with good behavior and m inimal altercations, he would be released in two years rather than four. “I broke into a house and there was a car in the garage. I loaded up all the stuff in the house that I wanted in the car and drove away in it.” He said. “I would store my stuff at different people’s houses just doing little hustles—everyone in the scene that was involved, we were in competition with each other to see who could pull the most fucked-up hustle.” Prison, however, was where Terrell laid a foundation for his passion for literature.

Out of the three years Terrell spent in prison, 15 months were in a security housing unit—commonly known as the SHU or solitary confinement. Here, Terrell recalls a specific incident with a fellow inmate where he was exposed to literature. “When I got to the SHU, someone knocked on my wall and asked me if I liked to read and passed me over a copy of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Beowulf,*” he said. “I remember looking at these texts and looking and kind of thinking and imagining the person in the cell next to me. All of these texts I felt like I was supposed to read in high school, I was now reading.” Following his release, Terrell enrolled in a community college. Through monetary resources and grants for previously incarcerated students, he was able to finish his undergraduate education studying English at UC Berkeley.

Soto and Terrell are using their past experiences to influence their communities and mobilize previously incarcerated people instead of building platforms for personal glory. “Since the first prison was built, there have always been people who got out of prison and went and got Ph.D.s and became lawyers and bankers and whatever,” Terrell said. “There have always been profound stories about people who have made it, despite all odds. Now we’re organizing and making a movement out of this shared experience—it’s crossing racial boundaries and crossing class boundaries.”

At the forefront of Soto’s educational goals lies changing the narrative and misconceptions around people from stigmatized communities. Having ended probation just last year, Soto is now focused on changing the lives of those around him, especially supporting youth and influencing policy. Defying what he calls the “bootstraps mentality,” Soto rejects the idea of becoming a model minority for people who have shared the incarceration experience. More specifically, Soto does not want to be portrayed as someone who dug their way out of their previous circumstances to inspire others to attain the same social mobility. “I don’t believe in the bootstraps mentality because I like to wear *huaraches*, which are flip-flops,” he laughed.

Both passion and determination drive Soto and Terrell to dedicate their work towards impacting people and ultimately influencing generations of communities to come. They refuse to let their pasts define them and instead use their knowledge of their experiences as a catalyst to influence reform, empowerment, and community.

“Yeah, I’m incarcerated. So what?” Soto said. “Once we’re gone, we’re gone, but what are you going to leave? Are you going to leave destruction–or a path to success?” W