



## **The Pelican Bay Scholars Program**

### *A College of the Redwoods Success Story*

The Pelican Bay Scholars Program began in 2015 and provides face-to-face college courses to incarcerated students in the far northern region of California, in Pelican Bay State Prison. Students can earn an AA Liberal Arts Degree in Behavioral and Social Sciences and complete the required GE courses to be eligible to transfer to a California State University.

CR strives to provide a top-quality college program to Pelican Bay students, with services that are reflective of those a student would receive on campus: access to textbooks and course materials, transcript evaluation, academic counseling, career planning, transfer assistance, and statewide college networking.

David Nguyen, who had been classified as a “lifer” by the California prison system, could never have anticipated during his incarceration at Pelican Bay that he would be presented with the prospect of transforming his life and eventually returning home. “I just wanted to be different,” he recalled. “Freedom is physical, but you can also be a prisoner of addiction—or depression. Liberation was different for me, and I realized education could be my path for transformation. I was still in prison, but I found hope.”

Unfortunately, when Nguyen initially applied to enroll in school, he was denied. “There were limited resources – and I was deemed a non-priority due to the length of my sentence,” he explained. Fortunately, College of the Redwoods launched a pilot program in Pelican Bay in 2015. Nguyen jumped in. And kept going...

## **The beginnings...**

College of the Redwoods Pelican Bay Scholars program began as a pilot program in 2015 with non-credit math and English preparatory classes. “There was no model,” explains Tory Eagles, a CR alum, and the Pelican Bay Scholars Program Coordinator. “But everyone was invested and wanted it to succeed.”

“They started with small skills,” Nguyen added. “They also needed to see if those who were incarcerated were even capable of going to college.”

The inmates proved they could succeed in the college classes and despite reduced staffing levels, the prison allowed classes to run in the evenings. “I could see the skepticism,” Nguyen remembered. “And the COs (correctional officers) would remind us not to horse around or fight or they would shut down the program.” The prisoners behaved and over time, built trust with the prison administration. Given the green light to continue, College of the Redwoods enrolled twenty-one students for credit classes in the spring of 2016.

## **North Star**

“The classroom is part of the north star in prison,” mused Eric Clark, another former Pelican Bay Scholar who was accepted as a social work major at Cal Poly Humboldt before he was released from Pelican Bay after serving 28 years

inside. “It gave us hope. Many of us had made horrific decisions, but education gave us an opportunity to better ourselves.”

Clark graduated from College of the Redwoods while he was still incarcerated and was able to enter Cal Poly Humboldt immediately after his release. He enrolled in the social work program, which allowed for distance learning from his home in the bay area. He is set to graduate this year.

“I know with a degree I can make a good living without fear. I won’t be facing the risk of becoming homeless and dependent on the government or worse, back in prison,” Clark said, acknowledging that as previously incarcerated person of color, that risk is real. “I can’t be complacent. I just don’t have another failure—a catastrophic failure, in me.”

## First chances

Jesse Sandoval was illiterate when he entered Pelican Bay State Prison. “Education was not a priority in my family,” he explained. “Everyone was focused on just paying the rent. And when there are fifty kids in a classroom with one teacher, it can be tough.” Sandoval’s on-going academic struggles eventually landed him in special education, which alienated him even further from school. Despite these challenges, after graduation, Sandoval enrolled at a local adult school in East LA. “But I didn’t feel like I was smart enough and just knew I was going to fail. After fifteen minutes, I got up and left.”

Initially, Sandoval said, Pelican Bay felt no different. He was frustrated at being required to attend anger management, substance abuse and other classes. “But I realized attending CR was my choice. And the other guys here came from similar backgrounds, which meant I could make mistakes without fear. I would never have gone back to school out of here (outside prison). Never.”

Having a young family to feed meant that Sandoval suspended his education after his release and went to work in construction. “But there is so much I learned that helps me every day. I hear people never use statistics but that gives you problem solving skills. We run into conflicts, but I am able to use de-escalation and communication skills I learned at College of the Redwoods to address them. It is a mindset change.”

A change, Sandoval said, extends beyond his job. His young child was recently diagnosed with autism—and while it presents challenges, Sandoval said he works hard to stay involved and prioritizes his child’s education. He also volunteers in his community, emphasizing the importance of making good choices as he does outreach to at-risk youth. When life allows, he also plans to go back to school to earn his 4-year degree, which he knows will provide a door to even more opportunity.

“I am no longer wearing blinders. Those things are gone, and I have more focus. People say the DA (district attorney) is soft on crime but look at the data. Look at what happens with those who have had an opportunity for education vs. those who haven’t. Education opens doors...”

## The need

According to the Institute for Criminal Policy research, the United States is home to just 5 percent of the world’s population yet holds 20 percent of the world’s incarcerated people. Most will be released at some point, even if they lack the means to support themselves. Over thirty percent will recidivate –and be back in prison within three years, but education can make the difference. Studies have shown that incarcerated people who attend postsecondary education while serving time are forty-eight percent less likely to recidivate than those without that opportunity and the odds of recidivism decreases as those students attain higher levels of education.

“Being able to attend classes also changed our conversations,” Sandoval pointed out. Inmates in the yard who used to focus on sports, cars, and their former(criminal) lives on the street, “Now talked about our classes and what we were reading. We could bounce ideas off each other.”

After CR's program's success, David Nguyen pointed out, administrators were also more willing to consider other programs. "CR opened doors to a different level of programming altogether," he said. "Programs such as NA (Narcotics Anonymous), AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) had been around but other new programs, like peace groups, victims' awareness, and other recovery programs were established as a result of all the work that the incarcerated community did to create a space where programs can exist to help folks transcend." Nguyen was also able to start a newsletter while incarcerated and prisoners were eventually able to participate in other means of creative expression, like art and poetry. "We made many mistakes. Incredible, horrible mistakes," he said. "But we shouldn't be defined solely by those acts."

After his release, Eric Clark used his education and other experiences at Pelican Bay to help secure a job with the Boundless Freedom Project, which shares mindfulness, ethics & compassion practices with people impacted by incarceration. All three men do community outreach when they can.

"We can do a lot more to pay our debt to society," Nguyen observed, "than just sit in jail cells as a burden to taxpayers. Education can help us become the best versions of ourselves and help heal what we once tore apart in our communities."

## **Link to**

<https://www.redwoods.edu/delnorte/Home/Pelican-Bay-Scholars>