

Student Success Stories



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Rigo trades LA gang for college classmates

By Rigo Estrada, former gang member, current UNR student



incident in the fourth grade and because I was such a trouble maker, I stayed on probation until 2004!

It was also in elementary school that gangs caught my attention. Growing up in Los Angeles you had to be part of a gang to survive and have the protection from other people. So after becoming an official gang member in early junior high, then came the drugs and alcohol. And lots of them. I overdosed on cocaine twice, once when I was 14 and then again at 18. I dropped out of school in junior high and did some more jail time: CYA (California Youth Authority), juvenile halls, placement homes, detention camps — you name them, I was in them.

All the funerals of friends that were killed in prison violence or some kind of gang-related incident never really made me want to change, not even the beatings or stabbing I took as a gang member.

It all started in the fourth grade, when I started getting into a lot of trouble. It was then that I set foot into Juvenile Hall for the first time. I was such a mess; I couldn't even tell you how many elementary, junior high, or high schools I went to. I was always getting kicked out or locked up for all the fighting. I was put on probation for an

What caused me to change was the time I was sitting at a red light in LA and a car pulled up next to me. Before I knew it, there was a gun aimed right at my head! I paused and stared at the guy who I thought was going to end my life with that gun. The only thing going through my mind was me in a casket and my family and friends walking by me saying goodbye. I couldn't stop thinking about the pain my wife, kids, and my entire family were going to be in. I just remember making it out alive and asking to be dropped off at home.

I walked into my house and grabbed all three of my kids while balling my eyes out, telling them I loved them so much! I told my wife I was sick and tired of the lifestyle I was living. I was 22 when I decided that was it for me. I was completely done with that life for good. Now I just want to be an educated ex-gang member. I want to succeed so, so bad!!!

I've been clean and sober for eight years now and haven't gotten into any trouble. I now want to help troubled youth, or anyone who needs it — that's where my heart is at. Now I'm really involved in church and I love it! I want to say many thanks to the staff in the GED classroom who believed in me and encouraged me so much to keep on going!!!

Editors' note: According to Adult Literacy and Language Interim Program Director Angela Andrade-Holt, Rigo came to the Western Nevada College program in April 2012 and passed the GED Test in June. He returned to take a math transitions class and proceeded to tutor his classmates. He completed English 98 and computer skills classes at WNC in the fall and enrolled in the spring 2013 term at UNR for human resources and computer science classes. And he gives back, currently volunteering about six hours per week in the Literacy and Language program, helping out wherever it's needed. "He's a quick and efficient learner who takes initiative and he can do just about any task that our staff does. I wish we could hire him!"

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From GED to associate degree, helping others along the way

My name is Sherena Burwell and I am a part-time computer lab assistant with the CALL (Computer Assisted Literacy in Libraries) program at the Clark County Library District. Never in a million years could I have seen myself working for such a top-notch organization because at the age of 17 I became pregnant unwillingly and before then I had already dropped out of high school.

My mother encouraged me to obtain my GED. She took me down to the School District's Adult Education office. I then received my book to begin studying; it was very thick and intimidating. I studied off and on. I was more of a computer/tech type of girl so the fact that there is currently an online program where students can study is amazing to me. I said to myself, "I wish they would've had this program back in my day!"

While six months pregnant, I worked at various jobs while studying. Five-six months later, after a long eight-hour work shift, I decided to take the final test. I got a letter two weeks before my eighteenth birthday and saw that I passed! This goes to show that hard work and dedication pays off no matter what you may be dealing with.

"Sherena is a valuable member of the CALL staff, always improving her skills. She recently achieved certification to proctor the Work Readiness Credential online test."

— **Tim McDonald, Literacy Services Coordinator, CALL program,**
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I've earned a Certificate of Completion in computer applied science and am now studying graphic design at the College of Southern Nevada. I'm nearly finished with my associate degree. I can honestly say that the GED paved the way to my dream career in computers. I plan to obtain a bachelor's degree in media arts at the Art Institute of Las Vegas.

It is a pleasure to share my story to help motivate others because I know firsthand that it is not easy.



Nicholas cares — and it shows everywhere

"Nicholas really deserves this award!" said Alejandra Ramirez, manager of the McDonald's Restaurant on East Idaho Street in Elko. Nicolas Hernandez Rosales was named Employee of the Year because "he is always on time, always does his best, and asks for extra work when his tasks are completed." Nicolas and the other award winners from area McDonald's restaurants were treated to a three-day trip to Las Vegas with all expenses paid.

Nicholas has been with McDonald's for nearly six years. A few years ago he was the only male employee on his shift at the restaurant, and Ramirez said he was like a big brother — always helping the other employees.

Nicholas has studied in the ESL program at GBC for several years and continually improves. The same traits that earned him the McDonald's award are evident in his school work. He has a strong study ethic and is always eager to please his teachers and help his fellow students. He even arranged his work schedule to accommodate his school schedule: As a result of his hard work he was rewarded with weekends off, but he requested days off during the week instead so he could continue in his classes!

He attends both morning and evening classes taught by Emily Huerta and Hal Hibbert whenever he can. His teachers love him and appreciate his deportment and attention in class. Nicolas is also very caring for his family. His brother received a serious leg injury in a ranching accident last year, and Nicolas spent a lot of time helping to nurse him back to health.

Truly, Nicholas does a great job — in school, at work, and at home!

In 2011-2012, 53% of Adult Language and Literacy students seeking employment found it; 76% of those wanting to retain or improve their employment did so.

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