

Completion ceremony for Vallejo's Center for Positive Change inspires, uplifts

By Dianne de Guzman , Vallejo Times-Herald

TimesHeraldOnline.com

When Rachel Vasquez was given the chance to speak about her experience with the Center for Positive Change at Wednesday's summer program completion ceremony, she took the opportunity and ran with it.

"It was important when I was asked to speak because the last time I was in the eye of the media, in the public, I was on the newspaper for my crime," Vasquez told the crowd gathered at Solano Community College. "So this really means a lot to me because I'm not that person anymore. I'm grateful for the opportunity to come up here and talk about how I've changed."

Vasquez talked about being incarcerated when she was 19, being in and out of prison since then and "accepting" that as fact.

"I got out (of jail) and continued the cycle because I felt like I didn't know any other way," Vasquez said. "In prison, they said that parole is going to help you do this, parole will help you do that ... the only thing (parole) was concerned about, was me, showing up once a month to test and not really giving me the tools to help me change the way that I thought, which in return would change the way that I acted."

Vasquez talked to the crowd about her improvements and said that she's employed, she'd been sober for a year and one week and that she was studying for her GED. In an interview after the ceremony, Vasquez said that the Center for Positive Change (CPC) worked because she wanted to change her life.

"I wanted to make a positive change in my life ... and I just wanted something different and I wanted a better life," Vasquez said. "I knew that by utilizing the tools that CPC was giving me, I would be able to change my life."

CPC is credited with giving a lot of men and women their lives back by acting as a single place where attendees could receive employment training and talk to mental health or substance abuse clinicians. Developed in response to the implementation of AB109, the CPC looked to help those affected by the bill, which let non-violent, non-sex and non-serious offenders be released from custody.

Wednesday's program completion ceremony celebrated 41 people who completed customized programs that helped the group get jobs, learn how to make better decisions and be better citizens. The room was filled with attendees who told the crowded room of CPC workers, family members and friends that, while most of them did not want to attend the programs at CPC at first, they're now glad they did. Graduates spoke of how they now had a job, or a stable place to live and how the organization helped them through the rough times. Tears were shed by grateful graduates, thanks was given to CPC staff and cheers rose from the crowd as each person received their certificate of completion.

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Dean Wilder, probations services manager with Solano County, said that they've helped close to 100 people complete their programs and that although there was initially pushback from placing the center in Vallejo — with a second center located in Fairfield — he believed that the program was really doing some good for the community.

"Originally, there was concern that it would be a place where we sent people to stay all day and it would just be a hangout," Wilder said. "It's not a hangout; This is a treatment center. We send folks here for their

treatment and they go home.”

Chief Probation Officer Christopher Hansen applauded the CPC, noting the crowd of proud families there to cheer on those who have completed the program. Hansen credited the staff with working with the clients and really helping them to get on track.

“I think (CPC is) a holistic program,” Hansen said. “We have people that surround them with job opportunities, job developers, mental health clinicians, substance abuse clinicians, you don’t have that anywhere else in one spot. ... These are high-risk people, they are the ones that have a high propensity to go back. ... They just want that hand up, not a hand out and I think that’s what we provide.”

“When you’re saying your whole life that you’re a failure, you’re a loser, you’ll start believing that,” Hansen later added. “We flipped the script to say we believe in you, you can change, and we’re here to help. We’re going to hold you accountable, but we’re going to help you.

“When they see we’re sincere about that, and that we recognize them, then ... it’s contagious.”

Hansen said that although some are hesitant to take part in CPC, most who do find it worthwhile.

“Once they get in, they realize they’re tired of ... I call it the rodeo,” Hansen said. “Going back and forth, in and out of prison. They’ve let their family down, they’ve got kids and they just need that right spark. I think it’s just a collision of things: Right place, right time and they’re ready. Once they get there, they realize that they’re ready.”

Vasquez was one of those graduates who was ready.

“My future plans are to become a substance abuse counselor,” Vasquez said. “Giving back the tools that I was given because that’s what’s going to help me continue on this path. ... If people really utilize the tools that (CPC is) providing, people can really make a change.

“I want people to not look at the Center for Positive Change as being a negative thing or a harmful thing to our community, because it’s really a blessing and a beautiful thing to have,” Vasquez added. “It’s something that I was never offered before and to see all the people that are here today that have utilized all the resources that CPC has, I mean, it’s just amazing. Really amazing.”

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