The Issue
The Resolve to Stop the Violence Project

Community Works West
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Special thanks to
the San Francisco Sheriff’s Department
Crime is a violation of people and relationships. It creates the obligation to make things right.

Justice involves the victim, the offender, and the community in a search for solutions which promote repair, reconciliation, and reassurance.

-Howard Zher
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The Resolve to Stop the Violence Project

The Resolve to Stop the Violence Project (RSVP) works with male prisoners who have violence documented in their criminal histories. Grounded in the practices of restorative justice, RSVP participants engage in a rigorous 5-day a week, 8-hour a day schedule where they learn and practice the program principles and exercises in community with one another. The frequent, enduring nature of the education, coupled with the mentoring that happens in the peer-to-peer model, is the program’s basis for personal accountability, transformation and healing.

The Manalive curriculum is the center-piece of RSVP. The Manalive curriculum involves analyzing and deconstructing the socially learned “Male Role Belief System” of superiority and dominance. Violence, and specifically men’s violence, is enforcement of the Male Role Belief System. Manalive groups unlearn violent attitudes and behaviors through critical analysis, along with the education and practice of emotional literacy and intimacy.

Participants are also involved in weekly Survivor Impact days, during which the men hear directly from outside presenters who have been harmed by violence in their lives. Facilitated discussions follow to explore the survivor’s disclosure and draw similarities from the participants’ own experiences of harm they have experienced or caused to others.

Lastly, participants have the opportunity to take classes in restorative justice circle keeping. Circles of support and accountably provide participants a safe space to consider and process the harm they’ve caused themselves, their families and others. Restorative justice principles are used to develop a plan to address and repair harm.

RSVP is a program of Community Works West, an Oakland-based nonprofit with an emphasis in translational justice. They empower individuals and families impacted by incarceration, and use their work to advocate for a more humane and just criminal justice system.

Editor’s Note

A story is an invitation to see the world through a lens other than your own. When we choose to listen to a story with open hearts, we have the opportunity to connect with another’s humanity.

This publication contains experiences and reflections from a group of men participating in the Resolve to Stop the Violence Project. In the first section, pages 8 through 27, the men and other individuals associated with RSVP provide insights into aspects of the program, including the Manalive curriculum and restorative justice circle keeper training. In the second section, beginning on page 28, there is a collection of writing by the editorial board in which the men share stories, experiences, and realizations. They reflect on family, community activism, and accountability, as well as addiction, gun violence, and previous experiences of incarceration. Remarkably, every piece of writing ends with hope for the future.

We are all more than our best and worst decisions. And more often than not, that “more” can lead to an understanding of our thoughts and beliefs, as well as our actions and reactions. Through the process of sharing and listening, we are able to better recognize what we, our family, friends, and community members need to live positive and beautiful lives.

I am honored to have had the opportunity to work with the Issue’s editorial board, and thank you to everyone involved in the production of this book. I invite you to listen to these stories, experiences, and realizations with an open heart and an open mind.

Kristin Godfrey
Welcome to RSVP.

Ten current members of the RSVP community wrote personal letters to someone new to the pod. Letters included descriptions of the program, personal advice, and what to expect once here. During an editorial team meeting, they identified key themes and important points, and compiled excerpts from each letter to create one comprehensive document. This is their united experience.

Welcome to RSVP.

When you enter this pod, prior to getting comfortable, ask yourself “Am I violent?” and “Am I willing to stop my violence?” If so, then this is definitely the program for you. Here, you must be willing to acknowledge that you have something to work on.

Where are you in your change? What are you struggling with?

When I first entered this program, I struggled. I had major issues with communication and would quickly revert to violence. The curriculum was very hard for me to grasp in the beginning, and I resisted the feedback I received from my peers. This led to me being removed from this program twice.

But if you are serious about stopping your violence, then you will persevere.

For the first week, things might be somewhat of a culture shock based on the work being done. A lot of people want to leave after their first day based on these issues, but I ask that you stay open to receiving the information the program has to offer.

This program will help you identify your male role belief system, which is where violence originates, whether it be emotional, verbal, physical, or sexual. It will teach you how to be assertive and speak out for yourself in a healthy, nurturing way. You will be challenged to be a part of the solution. But you have to want it, and be open to the basic information you will receive.

We encourage you to give the program a chance regardless of what crime you committed. There is infinite potential in every individual to do/be whatever they put their mind to. No matter who you are, you are important, and a vital member of the community. Soon you will begin to learn this curriculum and internalize the information, and it will change your life.

The curriculum here teaches you to be emotionally intelligent, to be aware of yourself, to use your rational mind, and to not be oppressive toward your fellow human. In this program, I have learned that I can still be assertive about any situation in a healthy way, and ask for what I need based on the interaction. I wish for everybody who comes to this pod to take this program seriously. I guarantee this work will help you in many ways.

There will be many challenges and temptations throughout this transition. We are still in jail, and normal jail things do go on. But as long as your will is to transform, then none of that will become a factor.

You will see people living a hardened image still, and it’s funny because they stand out like sore thumbs. From my experience, I learned within the first three weeks who was fake and who was real in their change. The challenge is becoming authentic, and remaining there.

Some men enter this program because they were court-mandated, some are simply placed here, and still others ask to be here. If you’re mandated to be here and you don’t want to be here, then it is also easy to stay out of the way and not sabotage other people’s growth. Really, it all comes down to a desire to do something different with your life, and a commitment to make that possible.
I was told that this program would possibly help my case; this is debatable. What I will say is this program has given me information that can help me unlock the door to a new life.

Our facilitators are solid and won't give up on you. Get close to senior advocates who have been in the program the longest, and pick their brains for information that can help with your positive transformation towards a better way of thinking. The work is on you, and if you need help, ask.

So I'd like to offer you, or rather, I'd like to propose an agreement with you. This program is going to introduce a lot of new language, terms, and concepts that will be strange to you. I propose that you be totally honest about your violence, and totally open to the new information.

Will you make that agreement?

Richard Contreras
Dedrick Daniels
Craig Hall
Michael Jackson
James McFarland
Daniel Medina
Robert Pelesauma
Eli Thompson

Manalive in RSVP
Introduction by Dedrick Daniels

Manalive is the curriculum used in RSVP that was designed for men that are violent and willing to stop their violence. Manalive helps individuals identify where their violent behaviors come from. Once we know where our violent behaviors come from, then we can begin the process of stopping our violence. Manalive then goes a step further and gives us tools that we can use to stop violating and start intimating.

The peer-facilitated exercise that we go through in order to identify our violence is called the destruction cycle. The destruction cycle is a moment-to-moment breakdown of a violent incident that gives us time to see how we set ourselves up to violate ourselves and our partners. We reflect on past violence during our destruction cycle, so we go through this process to see how we can stop repeating these behaviors in the future. In this process, we identify our hitman, or the image we portray when we feel our superiority is threatened.

After we complete the process of the destruction cycle, we move on to the second stage, which is self-awareness. The second stage cycle, the “assertion cycle”, helps us replace our violent behavior with positive behavior. This cycle gives us time to check in with ourselves in the moment of fatal peril, which we do by noticing ourselves through our five senses. This way, we can stay in fatal peril and intimate instead of violate our partner. In this second stage cycle, we also go through the process of identifying our authentic self: the person we are outside of our hitman image.

Even though there are six stages in the Manalive curriculum, in custody we work on the first two stages, to focus on stopping our violence and replacing it with intimacy. On the outside, the program goes a lot deeper with community restoration work.

STAYING INVESTED
Dedrick Daniels

Speaking about my authentic self is complicated for me. For a while, it was hard for me to recall a time that my hitman image was
not in the driver’s seat. I lost my innocence at a very young age, and I have been fully invested in my Male Role Belief System since.

I do have an authentic self that I have to constantly nurture, and I put forth the effort to let it be known. My biggest fear is being vulnerable and being taken advantage of in the process. It is important that I state this because I have had the opportunity to hear others share this same fear with me. I am glad that other people chose to speak up because now I see how common this fear is. By sharing our fears, we are actually getting vulnerable. We can see that we are not alone and we can see the support we need. And by doing so, I have become slightly more comfortable with my authentic self.

Understanding the importance of being my authentic self has helped me in my relationships. I am able to look at my partners as equals and not violate them. I am able to intimate in my moments of shock or fear, when my belief system is being challenged (fatal peril). Effective communication has played a major role in my authenticity. By utilizing the two tenants of intimating, listening and disclosing, I have found it much easier to not violate my partner. Instead, I empathize with my partner, validate their experience, and set/ respect boundaries.

Doing the work of remaining authentic is an everyday push for me and has yet to become easy. I do know that as long as I stay invested in the work I am doing and make a conscious effort, then I will fully become the Humble, Free, Vulnerable, Nurturing God.

POOR THINKING
Robert Pelesauma

My hitman was built through beliefs that were supported by my socioeconomic background growing up in poverty. I misused words such as “broke” to tell/inform my people that I was low on finances. Little did I know that I had a poor way of thinking because the people I looked up to, for ‘guidance’, supported a poor way of speaking. I learned the hard way that the choices and collective efforts that we make, as humans, determine a destiny for ourselves and others, and ultimately the world.

MY SOUL
Eli Thompson

WHERE IS THE LOVE
When nobody really cares?
I tried loneliness
My heart could never bear
It seems like my time
Is slowly wasting fast
And if I give up on myself
My soul will come to pass.

A VICTIM AND A PERPETRATOR
Daniel Medina

I was always told “don’t be someone you’re not.” I resolutely believed that I wasn't. It's crazy how misconstrued my thoughts were; I was entirely entrenched in a hitman. The hitman is the persona that I allow all to see. Through my 28 years of life, I have made my persona the victim, so that I could justify any subsequent reaction. Therefore, my hitman has two roles: victim and perpetrator. My victim role was the Betrayed,Challenged, Shameful Punk. Infidelity in relationships, being asked about my comings and goings, being accused, abandoned, and ostracized by my brothers, peers, and society for my mistakes. It didn't matter the issue, I justified my actions with my victim role. For the majority of my life, I have only been able to identify my victim
role, because I needed justification for my deeds. Only now am I naming the aspects of my perpetrator role, which is who I become when I feel threatened. Since I manipulate myself to believe that my actions are justified, and I don’t give up until I am satisfied with the results, I call my perpetrator hitman the Manipulating Relentless Retaliatory Liar.

**SEARCHING FOR SUPERIORITY**  
Michael Jackson

My ego has put me in some difficult situations in life, and has led me down some bumpy roads. This is also called the Hitman in Manalive words. The hitman can be a tricky person if you don’t notice your triggers or when you’re being challenged by someone. To be in the hitman role, you have to be in fatal peril, which is when someone’s male role belief system is challenged to make them feel inferior. That is when the hitman steps in to make that person feel superior when they feel challenged.

**MY GUT HAS ALWAYS BEEN MY AUTHENTIC SELF**  
James McFarland

Growing up as a kid you do not understand the battle you will have learning about yourself.

I can think of one experience that really exemplifies this. On a hot day in my childhood, one of my closest friends saw me talking to a girl he said was his cousin, and he wanted to fight me. My gut told me ‘why should I fight my friend, if we are still going to be friends after?’ Fifteen years ago, when the community saw a fight with the younger generation, they would run to it. And that’s what happened on this day.

I felt like my ego and the community wanted me to fight. When the fight was over, everybody asked why we were fighting. I had to say we were fighting about a girl. After that, everybody walked off, because to them the show was over.

Looking back on my life, I know my ego was fed a lot, and it won the battle until I came to this pod. In this pod, I was able to do a destruction cycle. From this I was able to see how I set myself up to do my violence. I became conscious of my violence and the impact that my violence has on others. In order to stop my violence, I have to first admit I am violent, be willing to stop my violence, and name the hitman to my violence. At this point, I am violent and I am willing to stop my violence. My ego is my hitman-demanding, aggressive, enforcer, punked, weak, bitch. Looking back at my childhood, my gut has always been my authentic self; the Quiet, Smart, Inquisitive, Reader. By naming my authentic self, I now know myself even more, and I am happy to intimate and not violate.
Survivor Impact Program
Introduction by Delia Ginorio

The Survivor Impact Program within RSVP invites individuals who have experienced violence, or who have been impacted by violence, to speak at the county jail in San Bruno in front of offenders. The program’s intention is to provide offenders with the opportunity to hear the experiences of people who are survivors of violence. For the speakers, the opportunity to tell their story and experiences can be a part of their healing process.

Survivor Impact presentations promote participant empathy by providing inmates with insights into how violence affects the victim/survivor and his/her family, friends, neighbors, the offender’s family, and the entire community. Offenders will hear the survivors’ stories and be able to identify forms of abusive behaviors in their process group after the speaker leaves. Offenders will also be accountable and will need to make a connection from what they heard from the speaker and relate it to an incidence of violence they have done.

Reflection by Daniel Medina

Every Wednesday, the RSVP community comes together for a special gathering called Survivor Impact. As a community, we come together to fulfill a specific purpose, as well as help others fulfill their purpose and with that we take care of one another. Our purpose on this day as a community is to have empathy for our speaker, and to be accountable for the violence we have done in the past.

Even if I am not the offender of the survivor speaking, I am able to relate their experiences to the ways that I have harmed others. I can grasp how my actions have impacted and hurt people in lifelong ways. At the conclusion of the survivor’s disclosure, one man from the RSVP program does a ‘wrap up’. This brief summary of what we have heard allows us to validate the survivor’s experiences, as well as pose questions for the accountability groups that we hold afterwards. I believe it is extremely important to reflect on the experiences of the survivors who share their stories with us. This is why I like to do the group wrap-up.

Our accountability group conversations impact me the most. In these conversations, we discuss the impact of violence and the way it has a ripple effect through communities. We must understand this in order to learn how to avoid violating people in the future. I sincerely thank the men and women who help us in this process.

RSVP’s Weekly Community Meeting

Learning how to communicate effectively.

The community meeting is a weekly forum designed for people to communicate their needs and address certain issues that they may have. Before I came to RSVP, I was used to just saying what I had to say, and that was it. I didn’t care if you wanted to hear it or not, and I didn’t care what you had to say. But through practicing giving and receiving feedback in the community meeting, I’ve learned how to communicate without being violent.

At first, it was extremely difficult and challenging to sit and listen to somebody tell me about my behavior; nobody likes to be told about themselves. The whole time the other person was giving me feedback, I would be formulating a response in my head, which was blocking me from truly listening. On the other hand, it was also difficult for me to give feedback to others in the community meeting. The reason for this is because I was invested in this “no snitching” culture. I felt like I was telling on the other person if I gave them feedback about their behavior. Then I started to realize that being invested in a “no snitching” culture has made my community unsafe, and it also makes the RSVP community unsafe.

I ask permission to give someone feedback when I have an issue, then identify how I feel, and ask permission to propose an agreement to deal with how I am feeling. I am open to receiving feedback from my peers, and I listen with my undivided attention. Through this, I have learned to communicate effectively.

-Eli Thompson
The Dante Experience
Studying Dante’s Divine Comedy
Introduction by Nicole Pagano

On a Thursday afternoon in March 2018, a group of participants in the Resolve to Stop the Violence Project signed up for a class called The Dante Experience. They took a chance to learn about Dante Alighieri, an Italian poet who lived over 750 years ago, and his masterpiece, The Divine Comedy. This remarkable poem tells the story of a man, also named Dante, who finds himself lost and alone in a dark wood until help arrives from a few divinely inspired friends. With their encouragement, Dante does the impossible. He travels through the afterlife and faces the terrors of Hell, the rigors of Purgatory, and the revelations found in Paradise. By the poem’s close, Dante’s transformation is so profound that he can look up to the stars in wonder at the love permeating the universe. Instead of being overwhelmed by the darkness, Dante finds his freedom by moving through it.

For those of us willing to take this daring trip, it can be an incredible ride. The people whose testimony you will read here decided to do just that. They showed up to class and tackled much of Inferno and a bit of Purgatorio. They responded to essential questions in their journals. They then shared their entries drawing on elements of lectio divina, an ancient monastic practice used when sacred words are read aloud. We also incorporated modern prophetic voices, like Langston Hughes, Chinua Achebe, and Barack Obama. We identified the good to be found in our words, especially as it relates to the framework of non-violence in RSVP. We looked at how our voices can be sources of empowerment and even love—to refashion ourselves, to appreciate our beloveds, and to contribute to our communities. We then decided to perform excerpts of their journal entries alongside Dante’s words as an offering for the larger RSVP community. The class engaged their studies and performance with courage, creativity, intelligence, and grace.

Their words stand not only as acts of poignant beauty and well-earned wisdom; they can also inspire us to face our own dark woods and emerge as lanterns of peace.

Nicole Pagano
Artist-in-Residence

THE DARK WOOD

The Dark Wood is a place of struggle and hardship, where Dante becomes lost, and also where three different beasts present themselves, making it harder for Dante to overcome his struggle.

My dark wood is an illusive, drug deluded, false sense of reality. It appears as a wasteland of forgotten dreams, a barren expanse of abandoned responsibilities. Here and there are leafless and fruitless trees with limbs that are crooked because I’ve manipulated them to fulfill my own selfish desires. These same trees have roots that are unseen, and choke my potential, forever keeping it buried. I aimlessly wander this place of absolute despair and hopelessness.

In this wander, I am approached by a leopard, with the body of a canacious woman, luring me with a substance that has a crystalline shine, and another that is glistening and sticky, with tar-like qualities. This deadly trio whets my appetite and stirs within me the need to intravenously intoxify myself to make the barren wasteland okay, and further falsify my reality. I see the green and blue faces of dead, enticing me to further bring about my own death.

As I latch on to all of this, I then come face to face with my lion, that is myself. I aggressively protect what I feel is mine, which holds me back further and keeps me still in this hopeless wandering. As the lion eases up, having gotten his way, I then get knocked down by this ice cold wolf, reminding me of my cold heartedness and fraudulent actions. This too keeps me forever stuck and frozen in an insatiable insane cycle of hopelessness.

-Daniel Medina
**VIRGIL**

Virgil guides Dante through the layers of Hell and Purgatory. As the two make their way, they come across evildoers who are trapped in the personification of their own personalities.

My Virgil would be my father, because he makes me feel rejuvenated by helping me understand things I could have misunderstood. Everything he's always told me was for the greater good. He always reminded me of the way life works: “You reap what you sow.” “Treat others the way you want to be treated.” “Love yourself before you love someone else.” He conditioned me to endure the hardest things in life. Because with every great gain, there is a greater loss. And with every high mountain, there’s a peak to cross. My father makes the way I make sense of life a lot easier.

-Rob Pelesauma

**BEATRICE**

Beatrice appears as one of Dante's guides and he refers to her as “his salvation”. She takes over from Virgil because, as a pagan, Virgil cannot enter Heaven.

My Beatrice would be my sister, Michelle. She has experienced most of the tough things I have gone through in our household and I have seen her transform into a beautiful butterfly. She has found a way to channel her energy and go to school. I appreciate how she knows me and is not afraid to call it how it is. And she still finds a way to be nurturing to me. I love her so much and I can't wait to be out there to help her achieve her dreams. I cherish her every day of my life.

-Richard Contreras

My grandma will help me on a different path. She pushes me harder in my change, supports me in spirit, and I am thankful for that. My grandma is my Beatrice.

-James McFarland

**STAYING AT THE HUB OF FORTUNE'S WHEEL**

Fortune's wheel represents the many opportunities that life offers us. The Hub of Fortune's wheel is the center of life's joy and opportunity.

We can practice staying at the hub of Fortune's Wheel by constant education, by staying positive and by associating with positive people. Be of good moral character and a help to self, family, friends, community and society. It is possible to make the appropriate mental adjustments and not just survive, but thrive.

-Craig Hall

**COUNTERING THE WOOD OF THE SUICIDES**

The Wood of the Suicides is the organic forest of souls that comprise the second part of the Seventh Circle of Hell. The souls of those who took their own lives are transformed into gnarled, disfigured and brittle trees which comprise this gruesome forest.

My journey started with poverty and a vicious cycle of violence. Incarceration has been continuous throughout my family, generation after generation. With that, the cycle has continued and, up until this point, remains unaddressed. I am now learning that I have been living a dishonest life and I was okay with that. I believed that life was supposed to be about pushing a hard line. I learned that I was on a one-way trip to prison.

Even though I knew that I was doing bad things, I looked at it with a “So what” attitude. I figured I gotta do what I gotta do. This was just me giving up on myself. With my new lessons, I am denouncing my previous ways of living and breaking my family's cycle of violence.

It has been really tough for me based on the fact that violence was my norm. In fact, I notice that a lot of people embrace violence as being normal. The problem is when I go against what's normal for people, I get backlash. Sometimes I am provoked by people who want to see me remain violent. In those times I have to utilize my tools and stand strong in not being violent.

It would be wrong to skip the many setbacks I have had. My
push for non-violence has not always been successful. I have made plenty of mistakes and I always will. The best part about making mistakes is being able to notice where I fall short and have room for improvement. Another way for me to look at my new way of living is by transferring my skills. If I can be in the streets thuggin’ and pushin’ a hard line, then I could also push a hard line in restoring the harm I have done as well. I wasn’t giving up on the street life, so I can apply that same ambition to living non-violently. This is my way of breaking the cycle of violence. And I want this story to serve as an escort for my son and the many generations that will follow him.

-Dedrick Daniels

One of the key things I am learning and that I ask of myself is: Do I know my own value? In order for me to go forward I have to know my own value and care about myself. I have been through a lot, and until this incarceration, I see that I have been my own worst enemy. I have been reactionary; I have been acting and moving on impulse. I do not want to be that way anymore. I will forgive others and hope that one day I will be forgiven.

I will love others without wanting anything in return. I will allow myself to live.

-Richard Contreras

Restorative Justice Circles in RSVP
Written by Jo Bauen

RJ Circle in RSVP

Nearly 2 years ago in October of 2016, I was invited to bring a weekly Restorative Justice circle to RSVP. What an honor to be included in this long-lived, cycle-breaking, human-change program. I met the seasoned staff, sat in on a few Manalive classes, and encountered the most feminist curriculum I’d ever dreamed of. Here are 48 men committed to deconstructing the False Male Role Model. According to RSVP, it is societies’ narrow definition of masculinity as unfeeling, tough, and physically dominant, that leads men to commit violence and crime. In RSVP, participants examine their inner ‘Hitman’, and strive to identify their ‘Authentic Self’. In the process, they hold each other accountable to a rare degree of self-awareness. I am thrilled to be allowed inside this laboratory for hope and change.

What is the Restorative Justice Circle?

I hold a weekly ‘Restorative Justice Circle Keeper Training’ with nearly 20 voluntary participants from RSVP. Everyone learns how to become Circle Keepers by holding circle. The circle starts with an opening, grounding ourselves, while letting go of the rest of our day, to be fully present. We send a talking piece around the circle to check-in on each participant’s state of being. We review our guidelines and state our values. Then I bring principles of Restorative Justice to each session, namely, that crime damages relationships, and that the people most affected by crime should participate in its resolution. We explore the fact that we all do harm, and we’ve all been harmed. Based on this common humanity, we dive deep into soul-strengthening topics such as freedom, forgiveness, fear, community, violence, justice and love.

How do RSVP and RJ inform each other?

Community Works West and its programs are based on principles of Restorative Justice. At the same time, RSVP is grappling with 48 criminals, most charged with violent crimes, and many of
whom will be released after serving their jail sentence. RSVP staff have the real-world, real-time task of preventing further violence, in the face of huge challenges that ‘free society’ presents: lack of education, jobs and opportunity, all driven by racism, capitalism, and gentrification. RSVP’s practice of Restorative Justice is, justifiably, tough on participants. Meanwhile, I get to share the Restorative Justice philosophy that reminds us that each person is included in the web of life. We explore the notion that both victims and offenders need restoration. This element is clearly appreciated by the men who are otherwise doing the hard work to become the person they really are or want to be.

What we discover together is that rehabilitation can be neither 100% tough discipline nor 100% gentle restoration. The men teach me multiple truths: they say that they need strict cognitive restructuring of their masculine identity for their very survival. They add that they need to know how they learned this false identity. Who were they before the hitman ever arose? What might replace that shallow self? Lastly, we are not afraid to pose difficult questions. How can we learn to love ourselves? And what is freedom, really?

In return for my bringing the circle to them, the men have taught me about how human change happens. I’ve seen men revise their identity, and choose new priorities in life. I’ve learned how a father can spare his sons from the false male role model. I am forever grateful for the opportunity to explore these questions with the men in the visionary context of RSVP.

Restorative Justice in 7B

Written by Eli Thompson

This was the first time in San Francisco County Jail history that they have allowed someone’s parent to come inside the jail to do restorative justice work. I am extremely grateful to have had this opportunity, because this country has created and maintained a justice system that is structured to separate black and brown families. However, RSVP and the SF Sheriff’s Department went against that system of separation to actually bring my father and I together, and allow my family to rewrite our legacy.

A few months ago, I was talking to my dad on the phone about my older brother, who was getting released from prison. During our conversation, my dad said that he had some fear about both me and my brother coming back to his house once we are released. In that moment, I felt like every bad choice and bad decision that I have made in my life had compromised the trust between me and my dad.

I brought this conversation up to Jo Bauen, the restorative justice program manager, and Delia Ginoro, the Survivor Restoration Coordinator for the Sheriff’s Department. With their help, we were able to make a plan that later enabled my dad to come to SF County Jail #5 to participate in a restorative justice circle.

Jo conducted interviews with both me and my father separately to identify the issue at hand, and determined whether we should move forward with the restorative justice circle. Once we identified the issue, my dad was approved for clearance to come inside the jail for two weeks, and we made plans to hold the circle.

I didn’t want to go into the process with any expectations, because I was afraid that I would be disappointed if I set my expectations too high. Leading up to the circle process, James McFarland used his training as a circle keeper to support me and help me prepare. We came up with a list of things that I wanted to accomplish during the circle process, and wrote out some questions.
that I wanted to ask my dad. He also encouraged me to go into the process with 100% accountability, and we compiled a list of things that I would be accountable for. I was very angry when I found out that James couldn’t join us in the circle as a supportive person for me, and I didn’t want to move forward. However, he supported me in continuing with the process despite this.

We weren’t allowed to hold the circle in the RSVP pod, so they escorted me and my father to the legal interview rooms on the first floor. That is where we began the restorative circle.

Restorative justice circles follow a seven step process. It begins with an opening, which can take many forms. Someone may read a poem or quote, or play a song. In our case, Jo read a quote from another inmate who had supported me in preparing for this process. Next, we introduced the talking piece. During the circle, only the individual who is holding the talking piece may speak, while others actively listen. In step three, Jo asked a check-in question about how each of us felt going into the restorative process. In step four, we worked as a group to develop guidelines that will keep the space safe for every participant, and named our personal values that we would bring into the process. Step five is the discussion round, and we were able to talk about the issue at hand. This part of the circle was most impactful, because after we discussed the issue, everyone shared a short personal story that was related to the issue we had addressed. When others shared their own stories, I felt as though I was not alone. At the end of step five, we made agreements on how to address the issue moving forward. In step six, Jo asked a closing question about what everyone would take away from the process. To close the circle, we read a poem from the same inmate who had helped me prepare for the circle.

I recently asked my dad about his experience participating in the restorative justice healing circle here in RSVP. He said he learned that people care about individuals who are incarcerated, and it was enlightening for him to hear about the work that I have been doing in RSVP. My dad also said that this process was new for him; he has never done something like it before. He remembered having a positive attitude going into the process, and was willing to do whatever it took to help me get my life straight. He noted that the process was different from the ways in which he has solved conflict in the past; “there was no peer pressure in the process, and we made agreements together.” These agreements are specifically important in conflict resolution because they allow us to ask for exactly what we need to restore the harm, and to set healthy boundaries with each other.

We opened the door for other incarcerated people to access this process of healing and restoring harm.

The part of the circle that impacted me most was when my dad told the story of when he gained sole custody of me and my older brother. He said “it was like a flower bloomed.” After the circle, I had a deep feeling of love. I believe the circle was a success, and we opened the door for other incarcerated people to access this process of healing and restoring harm.

I am going to return to my family different than how I left. Through this restorative process, we were able to bring the work we do in RSVP full circle, back to the community. I know that after this meeting, my family has a starting point for healing and rebuilding our relationships to become better sons, better fathers, better brothers, and better people altogether.
“Used To”  
By Eli Thompson

I used to talk too much  
You listen to me now,  
We used to love to fuss  
But now we work things out,  
You used to never laugh  
But now I can make you smile,  
And I used to get so mad  
But now I don’t know how.

A Commitment to Evolving  
Interview by Dedrick Daniels  
Written by Daniel Medina

We had the privilege to speak with a man whose perspective on RSVP is quite unique. From inmate, to facilitator, and back to inmate, Ivan Montgomery has seen all sides of RSVP and Manalive. We sat down to talk about his struggles, his triumphs, his upbringing, his support system, and the work he has put into his transformation. As you read his story, you will notice that although it is unique, it holds relatable experiences and lessons for everyone in RSVP.

Ivan Montgomery moved to the Fillmore District of San Francisco at the age of four after his birth in Memphis Tennessee in 1971. He was educated in private schools, and grew up in a middle class family in the 80’s. In the third grade, he was told he had a learning disability. His response? To read and study the dictionary. He told us that while growing up, “I had everything I needed, but not anything I wanted.” At the age of fourteen, he began hustling and selling weed and crack cocaine. “I didn't need to be out there doing what I was doing,” he said--but he wanted to be out there. He wanted his name to ring in the streets: “Ice”. With that name came an image that he would need to constantly uphold as the years went on.

He was incarcerated in 2004. One year into that incarceration, a young homie from his hood named Eddie Moore asked him if he wanted to come to the RSVP pod. Eddie was a facilitator, and after Ivan heard him speak with the Manalive terminology, he decided that he wanted to speak like that as well--and so his work in RSVP began. Despite the initial hope of his first time in RSVP, Ivan admits that he was there to better his case, not his life. Ivan told us that he would memorize all of the lingo, but he wouldn't internalize the work he was doing. At one point, he wanted to leave the program, but L.T. Guzman, then Deputy Guzman, talked him into staying.
He was released in 2007, but the remaining ties he had to the streets prevented him from working with Community Works West. Those same ties led him to a dope case in 2009, which resulted in his reincarceration. He jokingly told us, “I wasn't good at sellin’ dope. I got caught!” He returned to RSVP, and upon his release after ten months, he decided that he would work to become a Manalive facilitator through Community Works West.

He recalls meeting with his biggest supporters, Leo and Jerry, at a restaurant to talk about his goals. Once Ivan was hired as a facilitator, he began teaching TeenAlive, a version of Manalive designed for youth, at El Cerrito High and Washington High. However during his time as a facilitator, he failed to cope with a personal tragedy in a healthy manner. This led to a relapse into drug use, and he became half-in and half-out with his non-violent lifestyle. When he was offered help, he refused.

“Drugs weren’t the problem,” Ivan said. “They were the result.” Ivan believes that he couldn’t deal with his issues because he had failed to fully internalize the work he had done in RSVP. During a leave of absence from Community Works West, he committed a robbery that landed him back in custody in 2012.

At that point, Ivan was looking at a possible third strike case. Facing those odds, he took a plea deal for eighteen years.

He described feeling embarrassed upon returning to RSVP and Manalive; he knew he should have listened to his friend Eddie back in 2007. Many other people in his life had only given him what he described to be a “suicide kit”. But this time, Ivan reached the conclusion that he didn't want to go to prison with that same mentality. No matter what the future had in store, he would be invested in his personal change.

“I didn’t really have much to lose,” he said, reflecting on his attitude upon his reincarceration six years ago. Changing his mindset was the best thing Ivan could have done. He began a tour of the jail’s programs, taking classes, earning certifications, and gaining support from peers. He started a mentoring-through-mail program for incarcerated juveniles, and kept a chronological journal where he put his thoughts and feelings to paper. He explained to us that his journal helped him through any hard times. While in RSVP, he began to address previously suppressed trauma, stopped blaming others, and became accountable for his own actions.

In April 2013, he was able to push back his sentencing in order to complete more classes. Each following court date, he didn’t know if he would be sentenced or granted more time for programs. Miraculously, four years later, he was gifted a new arrangement. Instead of his initial eighteen year plea deal, he would be granted the opportunity to attend a program outside of the jail.

Through all of the ups and downs, support from peers has been crucial to his success. Ivan referenced the staff at Community Works West, and their refusal to give up on him from the beginning. “They wrapped their arms around me,” he said. “They never turned their back on me.”

He also shared his gratitude for his wife, and how her strength has kept him focused. She tells him “you’ve got to earn the trust back”, and “I can be your present or past tense.” She keeps him honest in trying situations. Once, she questioned why he felt that it was worth going to the hole for a fight. Her words strengthened his resolve to continue fighting for his freedom and personal change.

At times she would pick apart things he said, and he would become frustrated. However, he says he has realized that she won’t take BS from him, or allow him to believe his own BS because because she loves and supports him. Ivan told us that the relationship he has with his wife is the healthiest relationship he has ever had, and a key factor is their communication.

Once Ivan finished sharing his story, we asked him about his thoughts and feelings moving forward. “Keep your eyes open,” he says, smiling and sharing a genuine look of hope with the three of us. He suggests that men in RSVP should make a list of all the things that can sabotage their growth, and another list of ways to counter those things. He also reiterated what those of us here in RSVP know to be true: the first step toward change is admitting that there is a problem, be it violence, drugs, or crime. The second step is to want to do something different with your life.
Ivan also shared that he has some fears about his release. “Change is immediate. It’s evolving that is the commitment,” he said, speaking from experience. For the first time, he is leaving jail raw, which in Manalive we call authentic. “I’ve never done it before,” he notes. Treatment programs are also new to Ivan: “I am hearing things about recovery that are completely new to me.” Through it all, he will continue to remain fully open, and seek help when he needs it. He recognizes that he owes much of his success to the individuals who have supported him in this opportunity. Consequently, his ability to pave the way for the next person keeps these opportunities available for the men who follow in his footsteps.

Ivan’s unique struggle is an inspiration to those who have had the opportunity to know him. His journey stands as a beacon of hope that good things can happen if we work for them. Ivan, we would like to thank you for sharing the story of your triumphs and struggles, and for the impact you have had on RSVP. We wish you the best, and keep on keeping on.

A Father’s Experience, and his Struggle Now Behind Bars
Written by Daniel Medina

The word father, according to Webster’s New Basic Dictionary, is defined as (1a) a man who begets or raises a child. Under that same definition but a different context, it reads “formulate doctrines and codified observances.” As a father I believe it is up to me to form and portray beliefs and doctrines that my children can emulate. Additionally, I believe it is my role to arrange cultural activities for them to embrace and continue in their lives.

I have a daughter. She will be four years old on October 21, 2018, and I will leave her unnamed. I also have a son. He will be three on October 17, 2018. His name is Dylan Daniel James Medina. This story will be a brief synopsis of pivotal events. Although our story is unique, it is still relatable to others’ experiences of family and fatherhood. The focal point will be my experience of both struggle and triumph in fatherhood.

On the morning of October 17th, 2015 at around 2AM, my son’s mother was rushed to Kaiser Hospital on Geary by myself and a cab driver. He was going at least 50 mph, flying down Geary; every light was green except the last. When doctors completed the cesarean section, my son’s screams were strong. As I approached and looked at his red, bunched up little face, I smiled. “Hi Dylan, Daddy’s here.” He slowly quieted, then only a few goo-goo ga-ga’s were heard. The nurses smiled, and asked if I wanted to be with him or stay with his mom. I naturally asked if she would be okay, and after their assurance, I went with Dylan. My son was born about two weeks early, and chemically dependent. Everything else about him was perfect.

At that point, I was deep in my addiction to crime, drugs, and the street; yet daily I was with my son as he overcame his own struggle. His struggle as a chemically dependent newborn inspired me to eventually address my own dependency as well. Three months after his birth, I turned myself over to the authorities, told
my attorney to help my mom gain guardianship, and asked my mother to help raise my son until I was able to.

I spent eight months incarcerated, and asked to go to a recovery program upon release. After 90 days at Center Point (CP), I graduated from their program in 2016. At that point, my entire recovery was rooted in my son. When I left CP, I found myself physically separated from him; I was in San Rafael, and he was in Stockton. I felt the need to relocate to be with him, and I did just that.

Once I moved to my mom's with Dylie, my fatherly qualities became natural. I had a constant need to pay attention to his moods, know if he was hungry, if he had a dirty diaper, or if he was tired. Performing his demands was a no brainer for me. I loved reading, drawing, and playing games that heightened his motor skills, as well as setting boundaries early for his do's and don'ts. I became more conscious of my words and actions, and I developed a very maternal fatherly role. My happiest memory after his birth was his first day at the park. I was able to watch his smiles, laughter, and non-stop running up and down the slide; the absolute joy and excitement that he had was one of a kind. Unfortunately, as I mentioned before, my recovery was founded solely on Dylie, and once I found work in the Bay Area five months later, Dylie/Daddy time decreased to once or twice a month-- my recovery crumbled.

About a month before I moved back to Stockton to be with Dylan, I met my daughter for the first time. I received child support papers because of my job, and prior to this I was adamant that her father was another individual. She did resemble another man, but once I met her and interacted with her and her mother, I was convinced. We took a DNA test, and by February 2017 it was certain that I was her father. Then, one month later, she was removed from her home and CPS became involved. I learned of this and tried to come up with a way to gain custody of my daughter. This strained my focus on my recovery, and my ability to address the issues underlying my destructive behaviors. I became focused on getting work, a place, money, and independence so that I could bring her home. I took a job in Burlingame, but when I was laid off in July of 2017, I instantly reverted to old ways. My lack of honesty, complete willingness, and full open-mindedness were my shortcomings. A couple months later, I ended up back in custody, facing 50+ years to life.

I'm not one of those guys who are absent to their children while they are free, and become “I miss them so much” while locked up. I was with them. My son from birth to three months; I needed help so I sought it out, did my time, and came back to him. I found out about my baby girl and I got a job to attempt to be there for them both. Because I lacked honesty in my recovery and refused to ask for help when I was struggling, I am unable to be with them now.

I was arrested on September 13th, 2017. My daughter's custody hearing was scheduled for September 14th. She has since been adopted by a loving, caring, open-minded, open-hearted, and understanding family. She is not even four yet, so her mind, emotions, and soul are fragile. I have much more to say about her, but I am unable to at this time. I am very grateful for her loving family, and I know that getting to know her will be a slow process. I do not want to be an alternate or replacement, but only an addition to her life. My patience and faith help me to cope with this struggle.

My son Dylan, thanks to my mother's loving support and faith in me, will always be a part of my future. I had my first contact visit here in San Bruno on Father's Day, offered by One Family. I call my mom at least every weekend, and I get to talk to him and learn about everything he is doing. Every month, a church based organization from San Francisco comes to offer “Books by Dad.” I am able to pick a few books to read while someone records my voice. The organization send the books, tapes, and a tape player if needed to the residence of my son, free of charge. Because of this program, my son is able to hear my voice and follow along with the story as I read.

My mom told me from day one of my incarceration that my son will never forget who his daddy is. I know this is true because
of my time with him while free, and the look he gets when he sees me now. I also know this is true because my family supports and loves me, and I believe in my ability to succeed.

A few months into this incarceration, I realized that focusing on myself is vital for my success. This time around, I am targeting the issues that underlie my destructive, impulsive behaviors. I am starting to love myself, and I am planning my goals based around my own personal independence, and not my children.

My Savior
By Daniel Medina

When you were born my voice made you hush
I held you and thought I couldn't love anyone so much.
They told me you may hurt from the feel of my touch.
You were born opiate dependent, man that's such
An injustice.

Brought on by your mom and your dad
Who couldn't think enough to just drop the bag
And prevent the anguish that I know you had.
Seeing you tremble in the nursery always made me sad.

So I'd flee
To any temporary haven I could find
Just to pull out my drugs and escape my mind.
Cuz I felt like I failed for the hundredth time.
Consciously knowing when you left that you wouldn't be mine
But my mother's.

And that's what I used to justify my deeds
As I continued to run in your time of need
Abandoning the boy born of my seed
All these feelings inside led me to proceed.

To inject
Massive doses of suicide
Self-sabotage angrily to mask the feelings that I hide
Until a day came and right and wrong ceased to collide
Then I got up and walked out and put all my bullshit aside
I gained clarity.

And as my heart raced I knew I must self-sacrifice
So you won't grow up like me with no father in your life
I'll be there to teach you to endure any strife
And I'll stand by proud as you choose a lady as a wife
That’s success.

Knowing I broke away from what had me enslaved
Knowing you’ll be okay from the lessons I gave
And on the day that I’m buried I’ll be at peace in my grave
My last words will be etched up under my name

You’re my savior.
There Is No Cure but Care
An Op-Ed written by Daniel Medina

Globally, societies have devoted time, manpower, and millions of dollars to finding a cure for addiction. However, I believe the solution is actually quite simple. We can guide people to a positive life by encouraging them to open up about traumas and to find a sense of self and meaningfulness. I happen to be part of a program that assists me in that exact way, based on Restorative Justice (RJ) concepts. It’s called the Resolve to Stop the Violence Project, and the main curriculum taught is Manalive.

Chemical dependency and substance abuse create an illusion that life is good, while simultaneously destroying our sense of self and negatively impacting others’ views of us. An overpowering need for instantaneous happiness blinds us from the fact that true happiness will come from building and living a meaningful life. Through reading an in-depth study published in the Journal of Positive Psychology, I have learned that my happiness, which was previously a moment-to-moment feeling, has been a false happiness that originated from my chemical dependency. My unaddressed anxiety, depression, trauma, and pain resulted in drug use which led to my falsified happiness.

According to this study, meaningfulness is “one’s feelings of purpose and value on the life they have” (Baumeister, 2012). If I am able to find meaningfulness, in say, my kids, I am doing great. I become happy with my success, and others views of me improve, which adds to my meaningful life. On the flip side, if I am abusing narcotics regularly, more of my loved ones become disappointed in me. This guilt and shame leads me to seek out the instant gratification of drug use again, fueling a vicious cycle.

In a lab test done involving rats, it was found that when the rat has a positive pleasurable alternative to chemicals, it will choose the alternative (Alexander, 1981). The rats involved in the experiment had other rats (friends, family, community), an exercise wheel (work, play, gym, social life), and access to good, clean water (a healthy diet). These things helped the rat avoid the morphine infused water, just as they would help a person find meaning in their life. For people, finding meaningfulness builds happiness, which can lead to drug abstinence.

Despite these findings pointing to simple solutions, millions are still resorting to substance abuse to cope with anxiety, depression, and trauma. I am not excluded from the statistic: twenty-one million people in the United States are addicted to drugs or alcohol (Smith, 2017). As one of those twenty-one million, it has been difficult for me to find real happiness and a meaningful life. Conversely, I am discovering that, by finding my purpose and value in life, meaningfulness can actually create my happiness. Despite being one of the twenty-one million facing a similar struggle, my experience is unique. In the following pages, I will explain what I believe the solution is, based on my experiences and how and why that solution is working for me. I will paint a more detailed and relatable picture of myself in the past to help serve as a guiding reference for how addictive behaviors develop from an early age.

My first and only memory of my biological father is of him behind a glass window, as I cried in my mom's arms. A little over a year later, I was hospitalized and received about 25 stitches to my infant head, caused by a massive trauma from a collision with the corner of a wall. Around this time, my mom was either close to stopping or had recently stopped negative behaviors that could have gotten my brothers and I taken away. Exposure to that environment early on was also not positive for me and my brothers. I suffered more head trauma and additional leg trauma at the age of seven, and I was hospitalized for two months. As a young boy, I didn’t really think much of any of this trauma. My brothers and I were three young Latino boys with a single mom. To society, we were destined to fail unless helped. These are my roots.

In an article published by The Atlantic, researcher Mimi Kirk explains “Adverse Childhood Experiences” (ACEs). She explains
how race, income level, gender, and location can all determine how often a child experiences violence and crisis. These experiences of violence and trauma at such a sensitive developmental stage then opens the door for adulthood issues to burgeon forth (Kirk, 2018). That is not to say that it is an automatic result, but when these traumas go unaddressed, they have a strong likelihood to emerge negatively later in life as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, or obesity.

Based on this theory, my first drug use at twelve years old, my expulsion from school and my attempt to run away from home at fifteen years old, and my first incarceration at seventeen years old were not surprising. The lack of guidance in handling anxiety, depression, and trauma in my childhood continued through my adolescence. I was always told “stop”, rather than asked why I was doing these things. My mom was always mad at me or away from home, but no one ever asked if I was okay, or if there was anything I needed. The assumption, and really the stereotype, is that people always do exactly what they want to do. Yet, concern and probing inquiries about my feelings and experiences could have opened me up about my need for attention, companionship, and recognition. However, I have been living in a system that lacks that empathy. Punishment has always been the primary response, given immediately. Even in adolescence, there was no room to explain what I needed, and why.

In the book “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”, Paulo Freire describes the banking education system, where students are empty receptacles and know nothing regardless of personal experiences, and the teacher is a supreme and all-knowing figure. Within this method of education, any small infraction or defiance of the ‘norm’ is punished (Freire, 1970). This was the case in my school years. I was quickly labeled a problem student, gang member, pot head, bad influence, and a disturbance. Punishment was quickly administered.

My experience in the educational system really impacted me and my sense of self. I recently learned of Self Discrepancy Theory, which suggests that individuals develop a sense of self in part by internalizing external assumptions by society (Higgins, 1987). Understanding the theory has helped me see that, as I grew up a Latino boy without the father’s guidance I needed, I struggled to develop a true sense of self. I internalized others’ views, and I was never able to develop my own sense of who I was, or as we would say in Manalive, my Authentic Self. I believed what I saw and was told about myself and my fellow Latino and minority peers.

When the view I had of my own actual sense of self contradicted the traits I was assigned by society, what resulted were negative outcomes. These outcomes led to agitation, related to my emotions of fear or being threatened.

Then my actual attributes contradicted the attributes I felt I ought to have, which resulted in emotions of guilt, self-contempt, and unease.

There were early indications of anxiety for me. I acted out at school, home, the neighborhood, anywhere. When I put chemicals into my body, that changed. I felt fleeting happiness and, as false as it was, it helped.

From the earliest experiences of adversity as a child, to the false sense of self, amidst an oppressive educational system, mixed with substance abuse and a retributive system of justice, I was able to find fleeting happiness in a destructive life. A life where the grander day to day or year to year didn’t matter- only the moment to moment. A meaningless life of depression when sober, and anxiety when on drugs. An emotional chemical rollercoaster doomed to death if I didn’t find and embrace help.

Only now, sixteen years later, am I discovering that the path to overcoming addiction, finding meaningfulness in life, and becoming my ideal and “ought-to-be” self is not through a wonder drug or running neuro-electric pulses through my head. Although the cravings may diminish, those methods are not thorough enough because I, as well as millions of others, have past traumas that fuel
our behaviors. The solution that I suggest is nothing new; we see a similar structure in Anonymous programs. I am compelled to make society aware of this solution's simplicity. That said, the work itself is difficult. It involves addressing the traumas and issues you have, being 100% honest, open-minded, and willing to change and accept help. I am finding that, as I really dig into the root of my traumas and pain, I gain relief and understanding. The drugs and subsequent actions that brought me temporary and fleeting happiness have really caused me, those around me, and my loved ones an immense amount of pain.

Today, I am finding meaningfulness in being a father, and that meaning truly brings happiness. Even though I am away, my interactions with my children pave the road for my future with them, and it gives me hope for my own future. I also find meaningfulness in my life experiences, happy or hurtful. I have learned something from everything that I have been through.

Some individuals argue that people relapse to drugs, crime, violence, etc., after treatment, and therefore it doesn't work. However, I argue that programs that take steps to help the individual do the internal work that is needed, while introducing the individual to people with similar experiences, will be most effective in countering this.

Others argue that addiction is a disease, and that diseases are best handled by doctors. To that I say, addiction is a psychological disease, centered in the brain. Doctors are beneficial for those working to detox the body. After that, the work that needs to be done to avoid relapse is out of the MDs' hands. There is so much mystery in the medical world around addiction. However, if interpersonal support is what's been shown to help, why do we continue searching for an exclusively medical cure?

A big part of my solution, and it really is an umbrella term for a lot of things, has been work based in Restorative Justice ideology. I am so happy that I attend a class in RSVP specifically focused on restorative justice. The RSVP program itself is a restorative justice model, however this class has an exclusive focus on the principles of Restorative Justice, and that is unique. The roots of restorative justice go back thousands of years, and yet modern
society has developed a punitive justice system that focuses solely on punishment.

This punitive system is built on maintaining a norm that prioritizes discrimination, capitalism, and normalizing dehumanization. With restorative justice, the victim, the offender, and the community come together to find a way for the offender to heal the harm done. They also find what the offender may need in order to not offend again, and the community helps to ensure that all obligations are met. Indigenous communities have been using this model for centuries, and when the apartheid was ending in South Africa, their truth and reconciliation hearing was a Restorative Justice process on a grand scale.

RSVP focuses on establishing accountability, addressing past traumas, and identifying what I need to find and remain my Authentic Self. We meet victims of harm with empathy, and we validate their experiences through Survivor Impact days. We hold groups and discuss personal issues. We help each other do our work, we pull each other along, we hold one another accountable, and we advocate for one another. All of this is part of my personal solution, as well as “the solution” I propose for those struggling with drug addiction and other destructive behaviors.

It is not a cure, and there will never be a cure for trauma. We must remember that drugs and acting out are the outcome. The source is pain. We must learn that we can care for the hurt in us, not cure it. Now that I am on a path of meaningfulness, all my previous tendencies are counter-productive. I hope that many more people can agree on the solution that I am embracing, and plan to embrace for the rest of my life.

References


I normally like to conduct interviews in locations that are comfortable and familiar for my interviewee. This often means meeting at their home, a favorite coffee shop, or even over a beer. But incarceration isn’t normal.

James and I meet in the interview room of the 7B pod, home of the Resolve to Stop the Violence Project. At this point, the other forty-seven men of 7B have returned to locked cells. Over the last two months, I have grown accustomed to seeing the men out on the floor, engaging each other in destruction cycle exercises and survivor impact discussions. This is the first time I have stayed after my class; before now, I hadn't seen the men confined to their cells. Suddenly, their incarceration has become a reality.

Inside the glass-enclosed room, James and I exist as two fish in a large fishbowl. During the course of the interview, the lunch relief deputy glances over periodically from his stand. I have not met him, and I can’t help but wonder if he is confused to see a young woman in the pod. The interview room, presumably designed exclusively for interviews, does not create any feelings of warmth and comfort. Instead, it appears the same as the rest of the pod: plastic chairs and cold metal tables.

Regardless, James and I begin an interview that starts with discussing childhood pastimes, and quickly shifts to a conversation about unresolved trauma over a decade in the past.

Born and raised in San Francisco, James McFarland grew up as the only male in a home with his grandma, sister, and cousin. James kept busy as a kid, collecting and fixing bikes while working multiple jobs at any given time: he worked at a Safeway, two local schools as a janitor, the Magic Carpet Ride on Pier 39, and a bike shop (this one was his favorite).

James tells me he has always been a self-proclaimed grandma’s boy. Some of the men in 7B have asked James if he ever felt neglected growing up, as his mother and father were not always present in his life. “I always got a lot of love from my grandma; she’s my real mother” he says. “I never felt abandoned.”

His grandma always did her best to keep him moving in a straight line, away from the crime and drug use in their community. Now that James is reflecting on his childhood, he realizes that there was only so much she could do. “She couldn't control anything that I learned outside the home. Anything I learned about how to violate and deal with situations, I learned in my community.” Despite his grandma’s efforts to keep him away from negative influences present in their neighborhood, James was not immune to the pressure. He recalls getting in a few fights as a kid, and was introduced to drugs at a young age. As he got older, his drug use evolved; by the time he reached the middle of his teenage years, James had been introduced to crystal meth and began to use it recreationally.

“I didn’t have hobbies anymore, after I started getting high,” James told me. “Things changed.” Once a young boy obsessed with bikes, James began committing some crimes. The authentic self that lay at his core simply didn’t line up with the person that he portrayed himself as, or the actions that he committed.

During these years, James started staying out late on the streets, and soon found himself in situations that were increasingly dangerous. At eighteen years old, James went out one night with the intention of hustling some money for a family member. Earlier that day, his older cousin had called asking for help—he was incarcerated, and running low on funds.

While out that night, James met up with a friend whom he had recently learned was also his cousin. He recalls being very aware that they were out late. “I couldn't see everything,” he said. “It was dark, and we were both high.” The two young men sat in the front seats of his cousin’s car.

“Don't trip. Nothin's gunna happen.”

James’ cousin gave him some comfort as the two sat in the parked car. Today, James recalls these as his cousin’s last words.

In a matter of seconds, a vehicle pulled up. A masked man leaned...
out, and before the pair could make out what was happening, he began to shoot.

What happened next is a blur, muddled by panic, confusion, shattered glass and gunshots. James froze. His cousin tried to get the car's stick shift out of park quick enough to drive off unharmed, but in this crucial moment, the car jumped out of gear. Just as fast as the shots started, they stopped, and the other vehicle was gone.

Years later, James still has vivid dreams of the night. The event unfolds over and over from different perspectives, but there is one recurring dream that stands out to him. The other vehicle has driven off, and he jumps out of the car. When he turns around, he doesn't see his cousin, but himself, shot dead in the driver's seat.

James answered quickly when I asked how he handled experiencing his cousin's murder that night.

“I didn’t.”

He cried for the entirety of the next week, and refused to leave his home. Although he had previously used crystal meth for fun, his drug use quickly transformed into a means of coping with his PTSD. His cousin's father was the only family member he had any true conversation with, but he never asked what had happened the night of his son's murder. “He would always ask me how I was doing,” James recalls. “But he stopped coming around some time after his son was killed.”

There was something unique about James' experiences with his cousin's father; he was the only one in his cousin's family whom James could look straight in the eyes. While staring into his eyes, he was searching for something. “Five years later and I was still looking him straight in the eyes.” James was searching for any hint of resentment, and if he ever found it, he says he would have considered taking his own life. “Ye a h.”

Over a decade later, during an interview amongst plastic chairs and cold metal tables, I watch James realize that it's finally time to confront the trauma that he has always been too afraid to face.

“I always wished it was the other way around. But I value my life more now, since I've been in this pod.”
Things are changing for James. Today, he tells me, “hurt people hurt people.” Instead of opening himself up to healing from trauma, he became closed off and distant from his family. James has always been a quiet guy, but he was especially averse to sharing his experiences and emotions. “Before I came to 7B, I never used to talk about anything.” In RSVP, the men are asked to open up about their own violence and personal traumas. Although he is still quiet, James has become a leader in the pod as he grows more committed to the things he has learned. “It’s okay to feel hurt, it’s okay to feel sad. You just got to deal with it.”

In conversation with Manalive Facilitator Leo Bruenn, James begins to identify the ways in which he can ‘deal with it.’ He first identifies the simple importance of sharing the story—but not only with us.

Something that the RSVP program teaches is that there is never only one victim of a crime. Just as James was a victim that night, so was his cousin’s mother, father, grandparents, siblings, cousins, and best friends; all victims of one act. Through weekly Survivor Impact days, the men of RSVP are given the opportunity to hear directly from survivors of violence, including mothers, fathers, siblings and friends.

To James, the experiences of mothers with murdered children have always stood out, and he has learned that each mother’s healing process is different. “I want to know what the other people need in their healing process” he says, referring to his cousin’s family, and specifically his mom. “Nobody ever tells moms what happened.”

Going forward, James plans to reach out to his cousin’s family, in hopes of planning a restorative circle to address this trauma, over a decade later. By coping positively to address the pain he has felt for so long, he can begin to move forward and live his life as his true self.

After years of drug use and destructive behavior, James shares that he has never been his true self, or what it is called in RSVP,

“MOST IMPORTANTLY, HIS DESIRE TO HELP OTHERS ON THEIR OWN JOURNEYS IS NOT CONFINED BY THE SAME WALLS THAT CONFINE HIS BODY.”
his "authentic self." With the help of his peers in RSVP, James has been able to name his authentic self: the Quiet, Smart, Inquisitive Reader. This is the James that I have come to know during our time working together on this publication.

Today, James looks for ways he can help others who are in the RSVP program. “This pod took me out of my shell,” he tells me. “Now I want to inspire people to do more, and I want to give others advice.” Whether it was applying for his dream job or asking a girl out, James feels like he was never confident enough to act. “I always told myself that I would wait to pursue my goals. And I waited too long to start everything.” As he encourages others to pursue their goals, he has developed the courage to recognize that it is also time to pursue his own. James has dreamed of being a truck driver since his childhood. This is still his dream--and he has another. He would like to open a janitorial business in his family’s name.

Most importantly, his desire to help others on their own journeys is not confined by the same walls that confine his body. James wants to be a role model for his siblings, and encourage them to stop waiting to chase their dreams. “Now, I talk to my family on the phone about my personal goals, and I ask them about their goals and what they want in life. I tell them to pursue those goals, and to not waste any time.”

The personal work that James is doing in 7B has not gone unnoticed. Recently, James had a phone call with a friend on the outside. “She said that my little sister had told her that she now sees the big brother in me,” he says, and begins to smile. “When I heard that, I knew I was going in the right direction.”

After getting to know James through the editorial board, and having the opportunity to hear just a small piece of his life, the final advice that he gives makes sense. The men of 7B face a multitude of barriers to success, and to some, these barriers seem insurmountable. To this, James has one thing to say.

“Don’t give up hope.”

Amidst the plastic chairs and cold metal tables of County Jail #5, hope can be hard to come by. But for those who are committed to turning their lives around, abandoning hope is not an option.

This piece is dedicated to Ruth Evelyn Flowers.

“This is a promise to my grandma (mama) for my change and courage to succeed in life.”
An RSVP Reflection
Written by Craig Hall

In this piece, Craig Hall reflects on what he has learned during his time in RSVP. Additionally, he introduces a brief description of restorative justice, and makes an important connection between restorative justice principles and RSVP.

My name is Craig Hall. I was raised in Oakland, California, and I participated in a world of violence, drug use, and incarceration from a young age. I am now fifty two years old.

I was paroled to San Francisco in May 2015, after serving 20 years for voluntary manslaughter. I am currently charged with domestic violence, and I have been participating in the RSVP program for ten months.

Because of the Manalive curriculum, I am learning to be conscious about looking at my partner and everyone as an equal, and to not look at myself as an “inferior person” or a “victim”, because that mindset would be my justification to perpetrate my violence.

The Manalive program has taught me to not violate anyone emotionally, verbally, physically, or sexually.

I have learned that emotional violence is very impactful in a negative way, even though it may not leave physical scars. Emotional violence is the manipulation of resources, including space, time, energy, and material. For example, if someone bought you a cell phone and you stopped answering their calls, they could threaten you by saying “if you don’t answer my calls, I will get your services cut off or take your phone.” The person who was gifted the phone would be emotionally violated in two ways: the phone is a resource, and the phone is material.

I’ve also learned through the Manalive curriculum what verbal violence is, and how I have violated people verbally. Verbal violence is to threaten with physical harm, to trivialize what a person says, feels, or thinks, or to objectify a person (call them or refer to them as an object instead of a person). In RSVP, we say that there are three ways to verbally violate someone: to threaten, to trivialize, and to objectify.

Physical violence can affect people directly, and it can affect people indirectly. People that are around violence can also be affected, if they see it, hear it, etc. Like physical violence, sexual violence can also be done directly to someone, or can indirectly impact those who are indirectly involved.

So today, when I talk to anyone, I listen very closely and give them all of my attention. I ask them if they want a response to what they said, because a lot of times, people just want to be heard and that is okay too.

I am very aware of my “ego”, and I really try to keep my authentic self up front. I don’t hurt people today, and I strive to bridge gaps of misunderstanding and violence to understanding and peace.

Restorative justice is an ideology that helps to bring healing and justice to both the victim and perpetrator. The victim in a crime has much more input in the process of restorative justice, from beginning to end. The main point is to identify what it will take to make the victim whole, or as close to whole as they can be.

The second part of the process is identifying why the perpetrator offended, and what it will take to ensure that the offender won’t commit that crime, and hopefully any other crime, ever again. Restorative justice also helps resolve issues that may not be crimes but are conflicts, such as misunderstandings or disputes, because both parties discuss the conflict. The goal is not to find out who is right or wrong, or who wins or loses. The goal is to bridge the gap of misunderstanding, assume accountability, and determine what it would take to make each person whole.

Today I actively use restorative justice practice to resolve my conflicts and my peers conflicts when they ask for my help. I am thankful for the RSVP program because it has given me the tools to become a positive person in my community.

The Manalive curriculum taught me to be in touch with my
“ACCOUNTABILITY HAS TO BE ACTUAL CHANGE, ENCOMPASSING THOUGHT, SPEECH, AND ACTION.”

authentic self, to be aware of other people, and to not violate in any way, emotionally, verbally, physically, or sexually. Restorative justice practice teaches me how to heal a hurt if I do violate someone accidentally, if I have a dispute, or if someone else has a dispute and they ask me to help them resolve the issue as a third party.

Accountability is the philosophy that connects Manalive and restorative justice. Accountability is the total changing of negative behavior, not just saying sorry. It has to be actual change, encompassing thought, speech, and action. It takes constant work, but it is worth it to help yourself, others, and your community.

These days, I have resolved to stop my violence and I sincerely apologize to those I have violated in the past. I wish to be an agent of positivity for myself and my community.
Accountability and Recognizing Impact
Written by Dedrick Daniels

Accountability

Accountability, I would say, is an all-important factor in Manalive, and in life, period. Learning that I am responsible for everything that I do has been the largest contribution to my growth and development; realizing that I cannot blame others for why I do the things I do has actually become liberating.

When I first began learning about accountability, I thought that I was already being accountable for the things I’ve done. More than anything though, I just made excuses and attempts to rationalize and justify my actions. It took my peers constantly pulling me up on my behavior for me to finally see that I was doing something wrong and I needed to step my game up.

Once I got a proper understanding of what it means to be truly accountable for my actions, I started to notice how I gave others my personal power when I would blame them for my wrong doings. To be accountable was to be liberated. When I became aware that I am the one who controls my actions, and not anyone else, I no longer felt obligated to react to what someone else said or did. If or when I do violate someone, I can fully account for my actions and begin to do the necessary restoration work to heal the harm I’ve done.

I believe that Manalive stresses accountability because, in the event that someone does violate another person, the accountability tools can be exercised and the violence can stop there. At that point, the restoration work can begin.

Impact

Due to my irresponsible and foolish acts of violence, I’ve impacted so many people’s lives in negative ways. I’ve turned innocent people into victims and caused so much trauma; it is absolutely ridiculous. My careless acts have not only impacted my direct victims and their families, but by way of consequence, they have impacted my family and community as well. My violence has forced my family to hurt and to question the type of person that I am. I had to learn that when I am being violent to others, I also open the door for someone in my family to be hurt as well. I, myself, am violating my family. Whenever I make the decision to be violent, I take the risk of being taken from my family, which in itself is a form of violence.

Another major impact of my violence is the perpetuation of it. My son will know about the violence that I’ve done, and can easily follow his father’s footsteps; I know from experience that sons emulate their fathers. If my son sees me as a violent man, I am allowing him to do the same things and believe it is okay. Because I have been an influence on the lives of many children in my community, and they have witnessed my violence, they could also get a similar impression.

My arrest as consequence of my violence has also impacted my family and community, because some of those people consider me to be a valuable person to them. I provide support for members in my family and community, and when I am not there, I am notified of their hurt and concerns.

My incarceration has me almost completely out of my family’s life. There is no way that I can do my part in maintaining my responsibilities to them, and my family has to work twice as hard because they help take care of my son while I am gone. There is even more impact that my actions have had on my victims, family, and community. If I do not stop my violence, more and more people will be impacted and the cycle of violence will continue.
Crabs in a Bucket
Written by Dedrick Daniels

This piece of writing is dedicated strictly to my fellow hustlers in the hood. We do our absolute best to “get it out the mud” and “hustle hard”. Myself, I have always been very arrogant, and I had a thing for letting it be known that I had money. By any and all means, I'd work to stay at the top. When I'd fall, I'd become a “crab in the bucket”, and pull someone else down too in order to climb to the top.

I use the phrase “crabs in a bucket” because that's exactly how the people in my environment, myself included, acted. If you place a bunch of crabs in a bucket, they will continuously try to climb out. They will grab at one another and pull each other down in their desperate attempts to escape. Each crab has the same goal-- getting out of the bucket-- but won’t/can't help each other.

This is the same thing that I see in my community. We all want to make enough money to get out and do a bunch of fancy shit in life. The problem is complacency, jealousy, and loss of focus. I for sure lost focus of my goal and just stuck with what was happening in the hood. My main thing was looking the part for as long as I could. My ass wasn't going anywhere though. Life became a competition and I was going nowhere fast as hell.

When I was at the bottom, I would do all types of “hater” shit in order to get past the crabs that were also at the bottom with me. The more I climbed, the more crabs I put under me, the more crabs I pulled down, the more I began getting pulled down by the ones under me.

This foolishness continued for a good length of time, and we all got nowhere. Honestly speaking, some crabs die in the process, or get seriously injured.

It took me some deep reflecting to acknowledge the role I played in this nonsensical lifestyle/deathstyle. Unfortunately, it took coming to jail for my eyes to open. I noticed the violent charges my peers were facing, and how these crimes against our brothers and sisters were openly glorified. I noticed how others were being oppressed, and the lack of brotherhood amongst us. My role in these crimes and glorification of them was detrimental to myself and my community. Being a new father and wanting to live a beautiful life led to a search for a deeper understanding of my behaviors, and a desire to change how I've been living. Now, I look for ways to support people in their journeys, and I surround myself with people that will do the same for me.

The difference between us and these crabs is that we have the ability to make a conscious decision to stop hindering and start helping one another. We no longer have to be “crabs in a bucket.” We can be beautiful men and women, and empower one another. With the understanding that we have similar goals, we can help keep each other focused, share resources (whatever little ones we have), and we can reach down into that bucket and pull out our brothers and sisters that have yet to find their way. Today I can honestly say “I’m no longer a crab in a bucket. I have found my way out, and I will gladly help you find yours.”
“I HAVE FOUND MY WAY OUT, AND I WILL GLADLY HELP YOU FIND YOURS.”

Turning Negatives to Positives: A Reflection on Community Organizing
Written by Michael Jackson

As both a victim and perpetrator of gun violence, Michael gives a brief personal history before reflecting on his work as an organizer in his community. He concludes with his hope to continue working in the community when he returns home.

I often cheat myself by not going into full detail about my history as a community organizer. Sometimes I am uncomfortable communicating with others, but since I came into this program, I’ve learned how to communicate better and express myself like never before.

I was raised in a neighborhood that was surrounded by violence and drugs. This had a major impact on all the families within my community, in one way or another. At just two years old I was shot in the face, next to my right eye. I personally consider this incident to be the start of my PTSD. At fourteen I was hit by a stray bullet, which stopped me from pursuing my passion playing football. I have always felt like I never had an innocence during my childhood. Soon enough, I became a product of my environment and became violent and unsafe in my own community.

At sixteen, I was charged with two attempted murder charges with an older cousin, who was shot in the incident. Because of my male role belief system, I believed that men must protect themselves, and I armed myself for what I thought was protection. However, this put myself and others at risk. I ended up doing close to five years in the youth authority and was released at the age of 20. I came home with a different perspective on life, and I wanted to do better. I started working, enlisted into the army, and began giving my time to the needy. However, before I was able to join the army, I was victim of a random shooting in my community, an incident that almost cost me my right leg.

After this, I felt like the world was against me, and that I wasn't put here to do good for others. I stayed in the house most of the time, and armed myself with firearms for protection. Despite my
intentions, this only made me feel more unsafe. I felt like I needed a change, so I relocated to start all over. Although unaware of this at the time, I was running away without solutions to the roots of my violence and PTSD.

When I moved, I soon found myself married and with a family of my own. My wife was my biggest motivator in my change. We have had our ups and downs, but she has always put positive pressure on me to do better with my life. We would brainstorm together over pillow talk and debates that were sometimes heated and uncomfortable, but they always made us stronger. One night we came up with the idea for We Help Our People, a community organization to help impoverished communities become self sufficient. The goal was for our community to no longer depend on a system that was designed to leave them behind in economic development. As we brainstormed, I continued to think of all my family and younger relatives that still lived in my community, concerned that they would one day go down the same path I’ve been down.

I was motivated to become a positive leader because I have seen my community struggle throughout my life, and I know the potential that it has. My great grandmother became an activist in the late 70’s, advocating for her community on issues like housing discrimination and education. She fought for so many people but was never paid or recognized for her work. I wanted different for myself, and I wanted to make a career out of it.

We organized to get office space. Initially, people had to help out for free because we didn’t have any funding. This was a stressful time for me because I felt like I was out of my league, attending meetings with big developers, city officials, and funders. I felt I had made a mistake trying to become an organizer; I was a small fish (with no funding) in a very large pond.

Right when I was ready to back out and give up on our efforts, we received our first grant. We created a two month stipend program for ten people, including myself, to work on public speaking, community organizing, and weekly cleanups in the neighborhood. Later, with a second grant, we were able to start a program that focused on self-sufficiency and entrepreneurial skills. We did events like backpack giveaways, turkey giveaways, toy drives and events for elders and children almost every month.

The work itself was not easy. I was new to the world of community organizations, 501c3 non-profit paperwork, and city politics. One of my biggest challenges was working with the SFPD; part of my male role belief system had always been to avoid talking with the police. However now that I was involved in violence prevention, I had to communicate effectively if I was about positive change. To my surprise, most of the officers actually embraced me and even supported our events with their presence. This blew my mind, as I had always seen them exclusively as “the oppressors.”

These stereotypes went both ways. Some individuals and groups looked down on our organization, describing our organization as full of gang members and drug dealers. For some individuals, these titles were true because of past mistakes that they had to overcome. But even with our past mistakes and misjudgements, we understood the advantages that our community based team had over other, larger organizations that were based outside of our community. We knew how to navigate the people and the culture of our neighborhoods, connecting dots that people from outside the community couldn’t connect. At times, it was difficult to work with organizations that weren’t familiar with our community, yet had their own agenda for us.

That said, I believe that coalition building across organizations to build community and business is important in community organizing. Our organization was able to work with positive organizations who invested directly in our community. I admire these people, because although nonprofits are indeed businesses, they are invested in creating direct and positive community change.

The goal was for our community to no longer depend on a system that was designed to leave them behind in economic development.
My role in community organizing outside ended the night I came to jail. I wish I had known about false beliefs like the male role belief system before my incarceration, because I believe mine led me to my current position. I remained loyal to friends by any means, which was my downfall.

Since coming to this program, I have learned how to be more patient and humble. The tools, like identifying fatal peril (the moment of shock or fear when my male role belief system is being challenged), have made a huge impact on my life. I know that I can choose to violate or intimate, which has led me to be more in tune with my emotions. This has been an important addition to my relationships with my wife, my children, and my community. I know that with these new tools, I will be able to get back to positive work without making any other poor choices. These tools will also make me a better organizer. I lacked confidence before I was detained, and I did not know how to navigate politics or confrontation. Now, I am better prepared and willing to be more open.

I would like to implement parts, if not the curriculum as a whole, into the programming for We Help Our People. I would like to create re-entry services with the Manalive values, agreements, and structure, with young men as leaders who will pass positive messages forward.

I believe that people with similar experiences can reach every at risk crowd, no matter what age or race. This is the hard work that I look forward to accomplishing in the near future. I will keep fighting the good fight, and passing positive messages and energy instead of the negative violence that has impacted my family, my community, and society. If men and women my age, younger, or older get into this line of work, we can make a huge impact in any community. All we need to do is turn a negative into a positive.

“ALL WE NEED TO DO IS TURN A NEGATIVE INTO A POSITIVE.”
This piece is dedicated to my wife and children.

I would like to thank my wife and my children who have been supportive through my trials and tribulations. I work harder on positive change because I am looked up to from my household, but I look up to each of them as well because they are my equals, my loves, and the ones I live for. My wife calls me out on my BS even when I don’t want to hear it, or even if it sometimes hurts me. This is out of love, because she wants the best for me. I understand all of this more than before and I am forever thankful for the constructive feedback and criticism because it helps me become a better person each day. I am thankful that my kids are not products of the environment I grew up in, and they’re breaking the cycle of incarceration and violence by living as innocent children with healthy lifestyles. I give thanks to my wife for holding everything down while I’m absent, and for being level headed as best as she can.

Forever thankful,
Michael Jackson

Why Now?
Written by Robert Pelesauma

In “Why Now”, Robert Pelesauma examines what has led him to his current position at twenty-two years old. While reflecting on his past, he also inquires about his future, continuing his experiences of uncertainty.

At the age of seven, I remember my first fear, literally, was being locked inside a dark room, deprived from everything on the other side of the door. Separated from family and friends, my freedom and free will. Denied being human and treated as one. This experience of loneliness and hopelessness is so deeply rooted that I grew up getting used to discomfort, which caused me to feel uncertain about my future. At that point, I knew what it felt like to be lonely and hopeless. Hopelessness, to me, was that moment as an infant, when I couldn’t walk/talk to help myself or others find/figure out what I needed in the moment. I automatically assumed and expected that my parents would take care of my needs. I carried this dependent mindstate for a long period of time, turning dependency into my own form of manipulation. I speak of my first fear because it is part of my transformation to who and where I am today. It is one of my many emotions that tie deeply to my childhood trauma.

The struggle of my upbringing was the constant adjustment to different circumstances. I know what it’s like to have both parents, or one without the other. To have a roof over my head, or to not have one and struggle to find one. I remember having a curfew for supper, then a month later I was back on the streets, with nothing to eat for days at a time.

I grew up back and forth between two violent neighborhoods. I was a bully on one block, and “picked on” on another. All of these unfortunate events happened because of the poor choices I made.
I have come to the realization that life is literally what you make of it. This time around, I’ve learned what accountability is, and I am aware of the things I am responsible for within the moment.

As part of losing my innocence, I entered consciousness thinking that a “survivors mode” mindset was normal. I had these expectations of how people from the hood should look and interact with others, so I created an image for myself. I did things that would help strengthen my image because I wanted to feel safe every time I stepped into the streets. I endured so much pain and suffering to prove how tough my portrayed image was. This image I created was a Tough, Ignorant, Arrogant Deviant, because it was what society expected me to be. While trying to prove how tough this image was, I caused my loved ones pain and suffering as well.

While growing up in a home with both parents, I inherited a family oriented belief system. One of my core beliefs was to have my brother’s back, no matter what. I carried this belief out into the streets because there was a point in my life when the streets became my second home, and the people that I started off calling friends ended up family. These were the people who taught me what a man was, and every man I looked up to taught me that loyalty makes you family. We lived by the street proverb “blood doesn’t make you family, loyalty does.”

When people ask me about my childhood, I can only grasp onto my earliest consciousness up to when I entered the system at the age of thirteen. From that point on, my life only became a recurring cycle. I knew I wasn’t like the average kid because my childhood was complex. I knew how to play craps and gamble by the time I was eight. I started smoking tobacco and marijuana at the age of ten. I started drinking at the age of twelve, and by that time I was breaking into cars and stealing them. I didn’t pick up a gun until my second merry-go-round through the juvenile system. By the time I entered high school, my behavior was worse. I was selling dope and trying to play it safe with mutual enemies. As I grew older, there was more expected of me from my parents, peers, and probation officers. All these people pulled for my attention at once. They all pointed to “success,” but led me down different routes, which left me confused and uncertain. These childhood experiences contributed to my loss of innocence, and became initiating factors to the poor choices I made.

I do not want to ‘blame’ or ‘make excuses’ for my behaviors. These are important moments in my life that I am finally holding myself accountable for. I’m a product of my environment, but I refuse to continue the cycle of violence. I have become more conscious of the choices I make, from the words I use to the tone I use to say them. I’m twenty two now, and I’ve been incarcerated three and a half years. I spent a little over half of my bid in twenty-four hour lock down because of my own behavior. There, I was stripped of all my privileges; no phone calls, no visits, no commissary. I collected over 400 letters from family and friends. During my first visit out of lock up, my mother spent the whole visiting period crying because it had been a long time since she’d last seen her baby boy. She saw how pale and thin I had become, and I looked like I’ve been dealing with deep depression— and I was.

I also think about how my loved ones would be impacted, if I were to get convicted to twenty five years. Would my parents still be around? My youngin’ would be 30. What would our relationship be? Would I even want my loved ones to be there for me? But who would I become if they aren’t there for me? How much impact a single choice has-- that’s the biggest lesson of them all.

I was hurt and I am hurt, because this time around I may never go home. At twenty-two years old, I may be facing the death penalty. So at that point, tell me, who wouldn’t want to turn their life around?
Acknowledgements

Thank you first and foremost to The Issue’s editorial board: Dedrick Daniels, Craig Hall, Mike Jackson, James McFarland, Danny Medina, Rob Pelesauma, and Eli Thompson. Additionally I would like to thank part-time editorial board member Richard Contreras, as well as Ivan Montgomery who was interviewed for a feature piece. This publication would not have been possible without the flexibility and patience of each of you, and most importantly your willingness to share a piece of your story with the world, however small or large. It is by these acts of courage and generosity that we are able to connect with others, and through this publication you will touch the hearts and minds of individuals who you may or may not ever meet. Additionally, thank you to Gregory Lubisch for sharing your drawings with us, and for gifting us a beautiful piece of art for our front cover. To the rest of the men of RSVP, thank you for welcoming me into your community.

This project would not have been possible without the support of San Francisco Sheriff Vicki L. Hennessy and the Sheriff’s Department, as well as the deputized and civilian staff in RSVP. Thank you to Scott Schell, Jaimie Diaz, Leo Alvarez, Bhavani Kludt, and Ms. D. I would like to extend special thanks to Jimmy Espinoza and Charles Hollins, who welcomed me into the pod with open arms. Leo Bruenn, this project and smaller side projects would have been impossible without your help and support; I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Ruth Morgan, I cannot thank you enough for putting your trust in me to develop this publication. I am tremendously appreciative of your support and patience through this process.

Delia Ginorio, I am so impressed by the work of you and your team in the Survivor Restoration Program. Thank you for allowing me to join a few Survivor Impacts. To Jo Bauen and Nicole Pagano, thank you for putting aside time to contribute to this publication. With your help, we have been able to develop a representation
of RSVP that encompasses more of the program, beyond the Manalive curriculum.

Thank you to the Santa Clara University Ignation Centre for their support via the Jean Donovan Fellowship. Valerie Sarma, thank you for your commitment to this fellowship and its recipients. I would also like to thank Dr. Stephen Carroll for reviewing “Hurt People Hurt People”, and Christine Montonna for her insight into the experiences of women working in prisons and jails.

Lastly, just as the men express gratitude to family and friends for their support, I would like to extend my thanks to my parents Lee-Anne and Derek and friends who have been so supportive in the last few months.