

An adult leader who's 'been there'

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Fifteen years of drug abuse, jail and prison time lends more than a little credence to the message David True delivers.

The 60-year-old Live Oak man heads the Community Action Board's Youth Community Restoration Project (YCORP). With his long blond-gray hair tied in a ponytail and wearing flip-flops, True stands out in downtown Watsonville, where the project is headquartered.

But he can relate to many of the project's 300 or so teens, about a third of which he estimates have risk factors that include parents in the criminal justice system.

YCORP focuses on teen employment and other support, providing alternatives to Juvenile Hall. True will be leading a federally funded video project that aims to show jailed parents how their children feel about having an incarcerated parent.

True missed out on most of his first son's early years. He dealt with the guilt from that in many ways, including service to others and therapy.

He recalls waking up behind bars "so many times," with memories of a bad dream and a vow to turn his life around. He also remembers being released with \$200, spending a few nights in a cheap hotel and going back to his old ways, in part because they were "safer."

True — who is well-respected in probation and HIV prevention circles, where he helped start clinics in three counties — won't comment on what problems led him to leave home at 17.

But, he says he probably "made it" because he came from a somewhat privileged background. He says there were "family issues, like with any other addict."

A New York native and son of a bank vice president, he came to California in 1963, spending time in San Francisco and in numerous jail cells before settling in Santa Cruz in 1988. He got clean about a year later, after his second son was born.

He has often spoken to inmates about his ability to get and stay sober, in the Soledad state prison and elsewhere.

He calls it the "usual inspirational drivel" before flashing his quick smile, and says it just comes down to giving people hope and reasonable expectations.

In the late 1980s, after recovering from heroin abuse, True started and helped start needle exchange programs in Santa Cruz, Monterey and Marin counties. He joined YCORP in 2001.

Dana Blumrosen, a psychotherapist who works for county Mental Health Services' needle exchange program, said True trained her in the early 1990s.

"He's a tremendous hero in the community and put his entire heart into this work," she said. "Without David I can definitely say I wouldn't have had the career that I have and probably wouldn't have been so excited about being in HIV prevention all these years. He's a fabulous individual."

One barrier True sees in his current work is the culture of incarceration.

He contrasts his "welcomes" from jail into society with the reverse — returns to jail in Sonoma County, where he was a known felon.

As he would stride into the cell block, flanked by guards, he heard the voices of friends. "Hey True, you're back!" They would hand him cigarettes, bring him coffee.

"That's what I had, in some ways," he said. "It's a real dynamic we need to be aware of, and we need to have something approaching that when we are released."

But, for him, a turning point came in his early 40s, after another realization — that if he died his obituary might include accomplishments of being "nice enough; pretty cool; learned how to survive without working; never ratted on anyone; had good connections."

So True earned a high school equivalency degree, took some classes in prison. And a few months after arriving in Santa Cruz, became a parent for the second time.

Tuesday, his teen son met him after a 4 p.m. "Reclaiming Futures" gathering of teens before father and son headed to a Giants game. He is married for the second time to Susan True, director of First 5 Santa Cruz County. When pressed on his shift from felon to heading service agencies, True does his best to explain.

"Well, I got older, became a parent — I just wanted to be different," he concludes in a burst of energy, raising his body out of a chair, palms upward, before sinking back.

"Many want to be a good dad, but something goes wrong. What goes wrong? The grant has the capacity to put it all together and create a pathway for welcoming incarcerated folks back into the community in a healthy way and build in the accountability society calls for.

"You can't do one without the other, work with dad and not help mom on the streets with the baby. I think Santa Cruz can do this and I'm really excited about it."

He sighed and sunk down, locking his unruly hands together behind his head.

"There, I got my pitch in," he said, flashing another smile.