A BETTER WAY FORWARD

Real Stories of
Youth Development
in LA County

An official project of the
Los Angeles County Department of
Youth Development

When young people are well, we are all well.

Youth development means making sure all young people have access to the conditions and opportunities they need for their growth, belonging, and well-being.

Historically, Los Angeles County has been one of the largest incarcerators of young people in the world.

In 2020, young people, community members, and county partners came together to propose a care-first vision for investing in what young people really need instead of youth incarceration. This vision was called Youth Justice Reimagined.

A new Department of Youth Development (DYD) was created to bring this vision to life. These stories are a combination of experiences from young people, families, and service providers who are part of DYD's community and show us why youth development matters.

Jessica Luna's Story

I didn't know it yet, but my mentor, Andrea, carried her own story into that room.

She was born in Jalisco,

but grew up in East LA.

She grew up in the shadow of violence and over-policing.

A family member's harmful encounter with police stayed with her. Years later, the pain still did, too.

She became the kind of person she wished had been there for her, someone who could help people find light when life tried to bury it.

I grew up in the Antelope Valley, feeling like I was supposed to figure everything out on my own.

My parents were young and stretched thin. I learned to keep it moving.

After a while, all that loneliness started turning into anger.

Then one decision changed everything.

I got arrested.

I thought my life might already be over.

Just like that, my whole life felt split into before and after.

About a month later, my mom and I got a call. I was being referred to a diversion program.

If I showed up, did the work, and faced what got me there, I might avoid formal charges.

I didn't trust it.

A mentor and a restorative justice process? I figured somebody was about to monitor my every move and call it help.

Then I walked in... and it wasn't what I expected.

Hi, Jessica. I'm Andrea.

She seemed kind. Too kind, honestly.

I stayed polite. But inside, I kept asking myself...

Is everything really going to be okay?

Then I kept coming back.

Every time I walked in, the ladies in the office welcomed me like they actually meant it and helped me work on my goals.

I listened, took it in, and made a plan to make things right with Andrea's support.

Andrea didn't judge me. She gave me what I didn't know I needed: guidance, peace, and a real chance to change.

That's when I finally asked: why am I carrying all this anger?

I finished the program and avoided a charge that could've followed me for life.

And I didn't just get my future back. I found myself.

Now if you ask me who I am, I'd say this:

I am someone who can help people find light when life tried to bury it.

Magic Blackheart's Story

I grew up in South Central, surrounded by all kinds of people, cultures, sounds, and stories.

Everything around me was shaping me, even when I didn't know it yet.

Back then, my dreams were everywhere.

Maybe I'll be a soccer player.

Maybe a skater.

Maybe a filmmaker.

I wanted to do a little bit of everything.

But somewhere along the way, people made me feel like I was too different.

Maybe I'm doing too much.

Maybe I need to chill.

So I started making myself smaller. I started trying to fit into what other people thought I should be.

I fell in with people who didn't always bring out the best in me.

Maybe this is where I belong.

At 17, I was facing 40 years to life.

I understood that everyone should be held accountable for their actions, so I started to reconnect with myself to understand how and why I had harmed others.

I started reading differently. Writing with more purpose.

Making music. Learning structure, meaning, and discipline.

People started calling me the "jail philosopher." I was giving advice even while I was still trying to make sense of my own life.

Then I met the Credible Messengers through the Department of Youth Development.

At first, I was skeptical. I'd heard the same promises before from other programs that didn't fully follow through or offer what they said they would.

But I stayed open.

Over time, they helped me shift from just imagining a future...

...to actually planning for one.

Once I earned my associate's degree, I knew I didn't want to stop there.

Even with years left on my sentence, I started applying to four-year universities.



Others tried to discourage me from applying out of a fear that I would get my hopes up only to be trapped and disappointed. But I knew myself.

Then the acceptance letters started coming in.

Congratulations!



I kept thinking, if my incarceration is about rehabilitation, then confining me here longer and keeping me from opportunities isn't growth—it's just punishment.

The next day, I was placed into transitional housing.



A few months later, I was released from probation, and my record was expunged.

The judge saw how serious I was about my future.

He agreed to my release.

If we want different outcomes, we have to build different pathways.

After that, I started doing advocacy work with community-based organizations.

MAGIC BLACKHEART

I wanted to help shift the systems I once got caught in.

One day, I got a call from my former Credible Messenger.

CREDIBLE MESSENGER

We've got an opportunity for you.

How would you feel about mentoring young people through DYD's Reentry Action for Youth program?

I agreed to the opportunity.

Mentoring young people felt natural to me.

I needed someone like me when I was their age.

Now I accept all of who I am.

I can walk into any room and still be myself.

I don't feel like I have to hide or shrink anymore.

And I believe everyone deserves that: to exist fully without having to tone themselves down just to belong.

Stories like these show how we are shaping a new approach to youth well-being in Los Angeles County.

DYD imagines a future without incarceration, where all communities have the resources, opportunities, and supports needed for young people, families, and community members to be safe, resilient, and able to thrive.

"I hope that young people in LA County can realize and understand that even after everything that's happened, there's hope for something better. Where there's a will, there's a way. There are always opportunities out there if you want them, and I hope young people will want to do better for themselves."

- Jessica

"When I imagine a community where young people are safe and supported, I see a future of people who are doing a lot for society—people who aren't scared & are active contributors. I see new inventions, more art, more connections, more bonding. If everybody's shining to their fullest potential, we have a bright world and a bright future."

- Magic

What does it mean for you to be well?

What's your vision for youth in LA County?

What can you do to bring that vision to life?

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