

# Hard Climb Journal

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Est. 2021

## One Man's Journey: Ruben Cortez

### PROFILE

By: Kannon Chambers  
Senior Editor

The Hard Climb Journal interviewed one of CCI's community members, Javier Reuben Cortez, 58 of Boyle Heights, who has been incarcerated since 1992. Currently housed on Facility A, he is a true testament to the power of rehabilitation, proving that with determination and willingness, anyone can change.

Cortez spoke of his early childhood, which involved alcohol, drugs, growing up in the projects of East L.A. He first was incarcerated when he was 13 years old for grand theft auto. Soon his crimes would escalate to robbery and eventually murder. His older brother, who also has done time, was one of his biggest influences in his life.

"Every time my brother came home people would just surround him with money, drugs, women and I was like man I want to be like him," said Cortez.

In 1993 Javier started his term right here in Tehachapi. He described the conditions back then in CDCR as "rocking and rollin", and it wouldn't be long before he caught his first SHU term. He admitted to being involved in all of the prison politics at one time in his life and how criminal thinking

once dominated his very being. During his time Cortez experienced a lot of losses as well. "I lost my wife, brother, mom& dad... and it hurts...being away for so long, it's hard for me to mourn. I broke my mothers heart the minute she found out I came to prison, she didn't raise me that way," said Cortez.

Reuben went through many other dramatic experiences on his path to change. He remembered the toxicity that gripped him before his transition to coming to a Sensitive Needs Yard. While still in "GP" he noticed that people began backstabbing one another and "the cause" wasn't as worthy of a cause as once promoted.

In 2009, Cortez made the ego breaking decision to come to an SNY facility. That decision challenged the very core beliefs that he had lived by for his entire life. It's not as simple as some may make it out to be. This would drastically change everything about his life going forward. Some have admitted to feeling like less of a man leaving GP, especially men from southern Hispanic gangs like he once was.

It was worth it. Here, I can be myself, I can be what I truly am and reach my full potential. I don't care what no one says; you're not your own man on the mainline. You do what your told or you get dealt



Ruben Cortez on the yard

with. Today, the real me is here and I've found out I have a lot of good about myself worth exploring. I'm a brother, father, friend and getting better everyday," said Cortez with a since of pride.

Reuben talked about his love of sports and is a fan of the Lakers, the Dodgers and the Raiders. Along with showing support to his teams he has been supported by God. He acknowledged that it was God who kept him safe, encouraged and alive all these years.

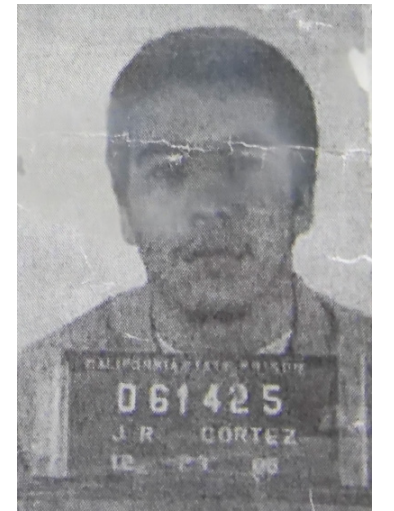
Cortez has been very active in his rehabilitative process participating in Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous,

and Criminal Gangs Anonymous. He is currently employed in P.I.A. where he is a machine-sowing operator. He has completed the apprenticeship program and is well on his way towards gainful employment upon release.

When asked what he would tell a young active gang member just getting into the system Cortez said: "Your going to go through some ugly stuff, your homeboys aren't telling you all the pain and suffering your going to go through. You have to change, and in order to do that, you have to love yourself and want more for your self.

The Hard Climb would like to

recognize Javier Reuben Cortez on the change that he has made and the impact he is having in the community at CCI. []



## The Boys in Blue are Back in Town!!!

### SPORTS

By Ivan Morales  
HCJ Staff Writer

The Los Angeles Dodgers completed a dramatic coronation in the fall classic defeating the Toronto Blue Jays, 5-4 in game seven, after 11 nerve-wracking innings. Dodgers claimed back-to-back championships according to a report from CBS sports.

From the outset, the Jays struck first. In the third inning, Bo Bichette launched a three run homer off the Dodgers starter Shohei Ohtani, giving Toronto a 3-0 cushion. Ohtani, starting on short rest while hitting, was dug in early.

Los Angeles chipped away. In the eighth, Max Muncy hammered a solo blast to make it 4-3. But the Blue Jays again

threatened to close it out. In the ninth, with two outs, Los Angeles' veteran Miguel Rojas delivered a game tying home run, forcing extra innings according to the report.

The bottom of the 11th became historic. With two outs, Will Smith launched a go-ahead solo home run off Shane Bieber putting the Dodgers ahead 5-4. The crowd erupted.

Now came the final out. Yoshino Yamamoto appearing on a short rest after a previous outing induced an 11th inning double play to steal the title. The Dodgers flooded the field, celebrating a second strait world championship. This win solidified the Dodgers as the first MLB team in more than two decades, marking a new era of dominance in Los Angeles. []



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EDITORIAL

By Roland C. Cardiel  
HCJ Editor-in-Chief

I began my prison term here at California Correctional Institution in 2020. I wish I could say that it was my first term but I can't. I knew something had to change the day I got arrested but I honestly didn't know where to start.

I've come a long way since then and I'm more than grateful for every opportunity I have been afforded along the way. One of my biggest and most humbling opportunities has been being your

Editor-in-Chief. I came back to CCI 18 months ago to become an OCMP mentor and have since then graduated. I was a staff writer when I left here in 2023 but coming back I wanted to give back to the community that had supported me for so long.

Benny Norton was the Editor-in-Chief when I got here and he was preparing to go to his next destination so I threw in to make this Newspaper keep running and to improve on it where I could. Since then we have grown to where we are now and I can't be more ecstatic for the future.

I say this with a heavy heart and the most sincere of attitudes but to this moment and to our reads I bid you farewell. I am on to another institution to complete my OMCP intern hours and hope to continue writing there. Thank you so much for allowing me to serve you as Editor-in-Chief for the Hard Climb Journal. I want to thank Ms. Hammonds

our staff-sponsor for all of the guidance and experience she so generously shared with me. Lieutenant J. Robinson for believing in me when I didn't want to believe in myself. I also want to thank Captain D. Bonfil for supporting the HCJ and helping us to acquire our media center. And to the CCI incarcerated community thank you. You are the reason I do what I do. I have gotten to know so many of you and hear your stories. You have thought me that there is so much in this world to be grateful for.

Thank you CCI Administration, Custody, Free Staff, and incarcerated community for everything. I hope to see you in the future as a free man giving to those striving to get out giving back just as much as I have been given, thank you.

Roland C. Cardiel,  
SUDRC, ARCPS, OMCP Mentor

Instructions for Empathy  
By Keenan Todd

One,  
Put yourself in another person's shoes.  
Are they Converse?  
Are they Nike?

Two,  
Forget the shoes look at the person.  
Are they Black?  
Are they Brown?  
Wearing a suit,  
Or state blues?

Three,  
Never mind their race,  
Pay attention to WHO they are.  
Not how they look,  
or speak,  
or program.

Four,  
try to feel,  
Try to Feel  
TRY TO FEEL!  
How they do.

Five,  
Remember that PEOPLE are PEOPLE,  
But not a PERSON  
Who's a PERSON  
That's somehow no longer a PERSON.

Six,  
Yearn to know their struggle,  
learn to feel their pain,  
even with separate journeys,  
we are different but the same.

Seven,  
Know that character,  
is who we are  
when no one else is watching.  
If someone saves a life in the forest  
And no one's around to see it,  
do they still have integrity?

Eight,  
Have a championship prizefight  
with your own judgment.  
Now, we are getting somewhere.  
If there was a screening  
for all my shortcomings,  
it would be banned from theatres.  
Who the hell am I  
to rank someone else's movie?

Nine,  
From the bottom of your heart,  
And from the pits of your soul,  
CARE.

Ten,  
Mean it.

# Attention Facility A,B, & C Inmate Advisory Council Members!

**The HCJ wants to share what's going on with your facility with the entire institution. If you would like to participate, please submit 3 or 4 positive updates from your facility to Ms. Hammonds via institutional mail.**

(all submissions shall be reviewed for content and may be edited.)

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Somewhat Illiterate By Roland C. Cardiel



# The Unknown is no Longer Scary...it Just is

**OPINION**

By Darius Goodwin  
Facility A Resident

Some things must be explained slowly, and some things must be explained a few times before its true meaning becomes clear to me. I have no problem asking questions when I'm lost, because the more questions I ask, the more answers I receive, and with every answer received, the less lost I become.

Active listening, being engaged, and being laser focused on areas of growth will always require questions being asked. I had a serious fear of asking the hard questions, because maybe it would make me less than, or maybe I would become the butt of the jokes.

No longer! No longer will I let fear keep me from gaining clarity about things I don't know. The fear of not being cool amongst my peers kept me in a state of ignorance, and it kept my growth stagnated at surface level only. Fear kept me in the dark, able only to gain basic education in areas where I needed to be much more than basic. Now that I've made the decision to do the work needed on myself so I can turn all the corners I need to turn, and become ready in every way for my return to society as a productive community member, fear cannot be allowed to win. Questions big, small, and in between must be asked, then follow up questions may be needed once



Darius G. doing his thing

the first questions have been sufficiently answered and grasped.

In my experience, no one person has all the answers, so use everyone at your disposal to help sharpen your insights towards social rehabilitation, and other areas your seeking to better yourself in. I once heard the phrase, "PUTTING IN THE WORK", and all it meant to me at the time was getting started now. That's not a bad way to think about it, because it's totally true, its still surface level, and in no way embodies what "PUTTING IN THE WORK" is actually referring to. Putting in the work requires getting to a place where you're doing deep dives on everything, trying to

gain the deepest understanding possible about yourself. Things that you may see as small and unimportant cant be pushed aside any longer, because in their own way, the things you may consider small may be just as important as the things you consider big, because all of these things make up who you are, how you think, and the actions you take in life.

Putting in the work means, trying to turn over every stoner both small and large, in an effort to discover you. In doing this you are going to start learning about yourself in an entirely different way, a way that takes you away from the safety of the surface, and begins your journey into deeper waters.

Traveling into the unknown can be a terrifying experience, and at this point it can be easy to call it quits, or tell yourself that you need to rethink some things. The truth is, that when you get to this point, you should start digging in your heels even more, and stays the course. This is your growth, your truth, your rehabilitation, and your future. No one can face this for you, and make no mistake you must face these things within yourself in order for the real change to begin.

Your mind will want to continue on in a place that is comforting and familiar, so it will place fear in you, so that you will begin to think that your new venture isn't

worth it. This fear will of the heavy sort, the kind that makes your heart pound by thinking about moving forward, but continuing forward is exactly what you must do. This fear is something that is telling you "This is not worth it" but this is a lie your mind is placing within you that must be overcome, and must be defeated.

I have personally felt this heart pounding fear, and I have been able to overcome it. It still creeps in every now and then, but I choose myself above the fear. I think every time I've overcome my fear, they have become easier to defeat, and I have become a stronger person because of it. Fear, in my opinion will always be a part of the equation while you are putting in the work, but it does not have to be overwhelming or all encompassing to the point that you throw in the towel. To the contrary, fear is to be use as knowledge that you are doing something right, and that you're determined to see it through. Move on to the next right thing in your life, fully aware that fear will try to trip you up, and have confidence that again you will overcome it.

The unknown just is, fear just is, and the doubts that both can place within you just are, but I'm living proof, along with many, many others that if you stay committed to putting in the work you will prevail.

## Personal Transformation

**OPINION**

Personal Transformation  
By Enrique Acosta  
Facility A Resident

Life struggles began in my early childhood. Growing up in a dysfunctional household combined with being less fortunate than others bred a mind state of survival, created warped beliefs, which led me to criminality. My arrest history started at the age of eleven years old. Eventually, I fell into a lifestyle of addiction (beliefs, habits & mannerisms) and cycle of addiction (obsession, compulsion & progression). My life of crime and substance use spiraled out of control. I found myself in juvenile halls, camps, youth authority, county jails, and prison for my third time, this time with a life sentence.

On November 23rd, 2023, while on Facility B of C.C.I., I made one of the



Enrique Acosta

best choices of my life, to stop using substances. I've been clean and sober since then, now I have a sponsor, I've worked the twelve steps, and surrendered to my higher power. I started to set S.M.A.R.T goals as well as attending groups which eventually led to facilitating groups, being a service to others. This service not only has begun to help others, but has been a tremendous impact on my life also. Since my personal transformation began, I've also

completed the building maintenance vocation, graduated A.R.C., C.G.A & B.P.H., Exploring Trauma, Defy Venture, I've enrolled in college, finished correspondence courses, and I am now apart of P.L.M.P.

It's no secret how violent Facility B is, but I'm living proof that change is possible. I thank God for finally becoming a level three, now on Facility A. There are resources out there for those that are



Enrique In Action

willing to utilize them. Don't participate in these programs just to get a chrono, but to really have the tools to be a better man, finding true freedom for you.

I've found a remarkable thing...peace. Finally after all this time, I'm transforming into the man I was created to be. Thanks to everyone who played apart in my story. May God bless you all on that level 4. I miss you guys and I'm praying for you. []

"I've found a remarkable thing... peace."

# It's Christmas in Housing Unit 5!

## FEATURE

By Christopher Corbit  
HCJ Staff Writer

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas at California Correctional Institution's Facility A.

In C-section of housing unit 5 every wall is adorned with Christmas decorations. This year the residents in this section spent countless hours crafting decorations including a 12-foot Christmas tree fully decked out with hand crafted lights, ribbon, pictures of loved ones, and other hand made renditions of ornaments. The Hard Climb Journal interviewed a few of these residents starting with Jamie "Nacho" Estrada. When asked about his thoughts on these decorations he said "it's been since 1994 since I have seen any decorations like this" he went on to say that in the beginning his eyes couldn't take it because of all the colors. I went on to ask him how this made him feel and he said "it makes me feel emotional, it makes me want to go home faster to my family and my wife". When asked about other housing units doing this his response was, "I think the whole prison should, if it humanized me it can humanize them as well"

The next person I spoke with was José Canella and he said that this takes him back to his childhood and really brings him the joy of the Christmas season and fills him with the holiday spirit. As we were speaking another resident chimed in that the tree looks better than some of the ones out there.

I was able to get a moment to speak with the mastermind of this operation Kurt Billie. I asked him what inspired him to do all of this and his response was eye opening. He said for a long part of his life this time of the year had been a depressing time. It wasn't until a phone call with his mother during one of those low moments that she told him "depression is like a bully, the more you try to ignore it the more it will try to hurt you". She went on to tell him, "When you turn around and face it, it no longer wants to bother you. You can't let go of depression, but it can let go of you".

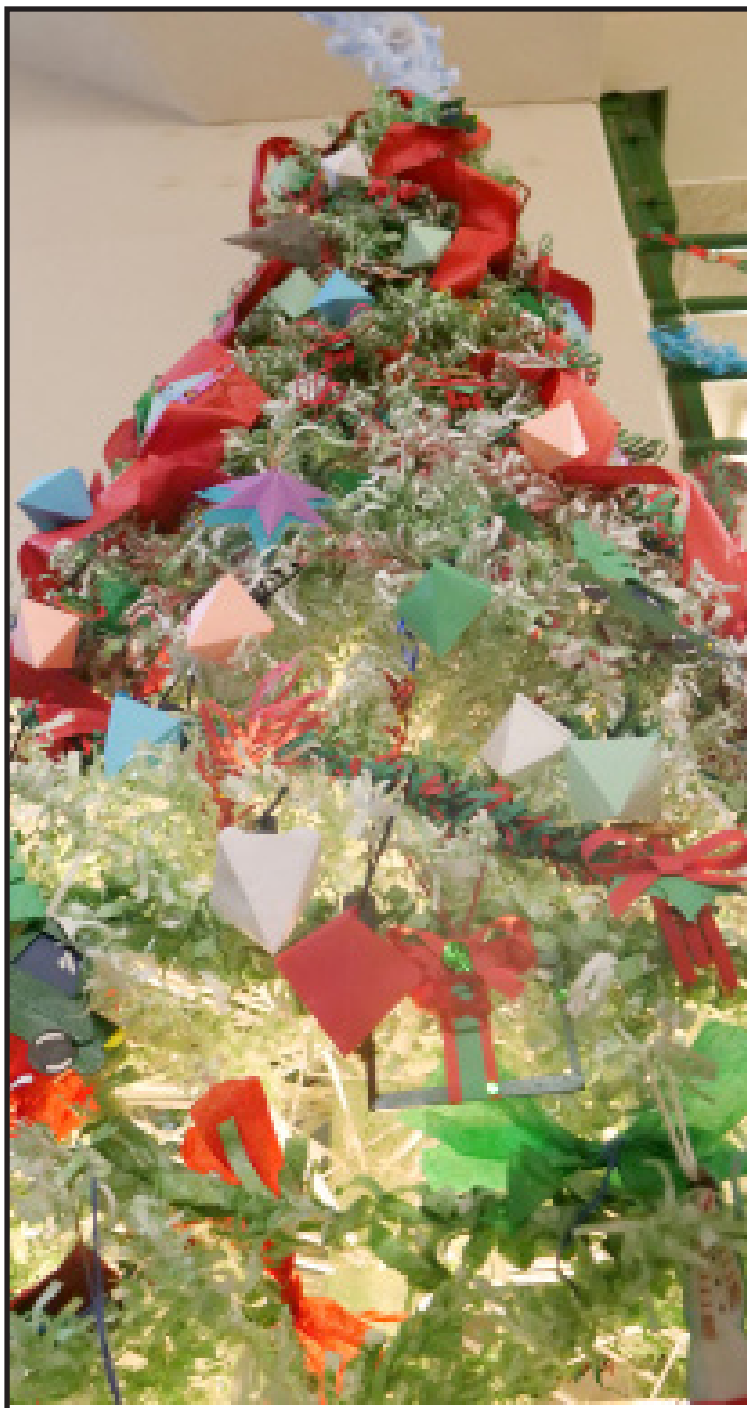
Kurt said that it started out as a small gingerbread house and every year it got bigger until it became what you see today. When asked where he learned how to do these crafts, he shared his upbringing on the Navajo Nation Reservation where his family lived a simple life. Growing up in a home without electricity, water, gas lines or even paved roads. His parents loved Christmas and shared that love with him and they would make everything from scratch.

"I didn't know I could do all of this until I came to prison," said Kurt. He said that he thinks the benefits outweigh the costs when

working on all of this. This literally brought together the whole dayroom, from the socializing and the dialogs going on it really brought on the sense of community and proved that you can have fun without any of the nonsense that prison once provided and produced.

The walls inside the section were barren and void of any color and for years saturated in pain and anger. But today thanks to the hard work and positive attitudes of those who pitched in to change that these walls serve as an example and beacon of hope that change is possible and prison is only prison if you allow it to be.

"I didn't know I could do all of this until I came to prison,"



# Facility C's First Annual Fall Festival

## COMMUNITY

By Nathan "Ari" Sessing  
Facility C Resident

On November 6th C-yard commenced the first annual Fall Festival with a huge turnout for all in attendance. Representatives from the Peer Support Specialists, OMCP, PLMP, CCI Medical Staff, ARC, and the formerly incarcerated Barret Fadden and Kevin Walsh who all came out to show their support for the community.

Barret Fadden formerly incarcerated here at CCI, kicked thing off with a group prayer. The music began along with games and other entertainment for the day. CCI Medical staff hosted several booths such as ring toss, ladder golf, and musical chairs, which had the community quite entertained. The onlookers laughed as seemingly hardened incarcerated individuals scrambled and bumped like children to get the open seats when the music stopped. Corn-hole and volleyball tournaments were also running with sweets and beverages for the winners.

Along with the day's events was the quarterly food sale. P-Dubs, Panda Express, and Little Cesar's came out to distribute the food and in honor of the day the provided complimentary drinks.

Barret and his wife Olga brought literature based on using faith as a guidepost to returning to the community. "I spent twenty years on the inside and I didn't know what to expect when I got out, I had to learn. I thought I had plans but when I got out I wasn't prepared for anything. The guide has to do with emotional intelligence, regulation, and technology. It's a roadmap for when we get out with Jesus Christ as the foundation", said Barret.

After the games and food were over the first ever homerun derby between CCI residents and Custody staff began. Captain Skaggs accepted the challenge with his crew consisting of Lieutenant Robinson (Facility A) and Officers McKern and Hernandez. The Incarcerated team had Kirk, "Magic", Cody, Rick, Dre, and Greene with resident Matt Stoll Pitching.

At the warm up it was clear that Custody staff has spent plenty of time at the batting cages peppering the roofs of C Yard with baseballs. The final score was 11-8 with the Custody staff smashing out the residents in the end.

The day was jubilant for everyone and we all are looking forward to the next one. []



Facility C Residents trying their luck at corn-hole



Little Caesars Shoing up and showing out



Former resident Barret Fadden sharing hope with a resident



Former IP Kevin Walsh praying with resident



Peer Support Specialists showing out



Peer Support Specialist Carlos helping out



ARC's Chris Dodds



Facility C Residents enjoying the festivities

ART SHOWCASE: Marcos Z.





Got a Story?

## Attention Facility A, B, & C!!!

If you have an article you would like to submit to The Hard Climb Journal we would love to hear from you. You can send them via institutional mail to:

The Hard Climb Journal  
C/O Ms. Hammonds Facility A Dining Hall 1

All articles will be reviewed by the HCJ Editorial Board for content and clarity.

*\* stories may be edited*

# The Hard Climb Journal