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THE IMPACT OF A SINGULAR MAN

by Sue Dremann

David Lewis' life was cut short June 9, but his vision for how addicts and convicts could be redeemed lives on

In a photograph of David Lewis, the East Palo Alto community leader is standing amid sculptures of slaves in Zanzibar, Africa. Thick chains encircle the lava-rock figures' necks. Lewis is holding the chain binding the emaciated group. He appears linked to the historic past, yet he could also be their liberator.

Lewis, who was shot to death June 9 in San Mateo, took on both roles in life. He knew well the chains that bind a man. He spent 17 years in California prisons and was a recovering drug addict.

But he transcended his own past to become a leading figure in drug rehabilitation and the re-integration of parolees into society. Through the force of his personality, visionary ideas and tenacious belief in the power of second chances, he was able to unfetter the chains that bound others.

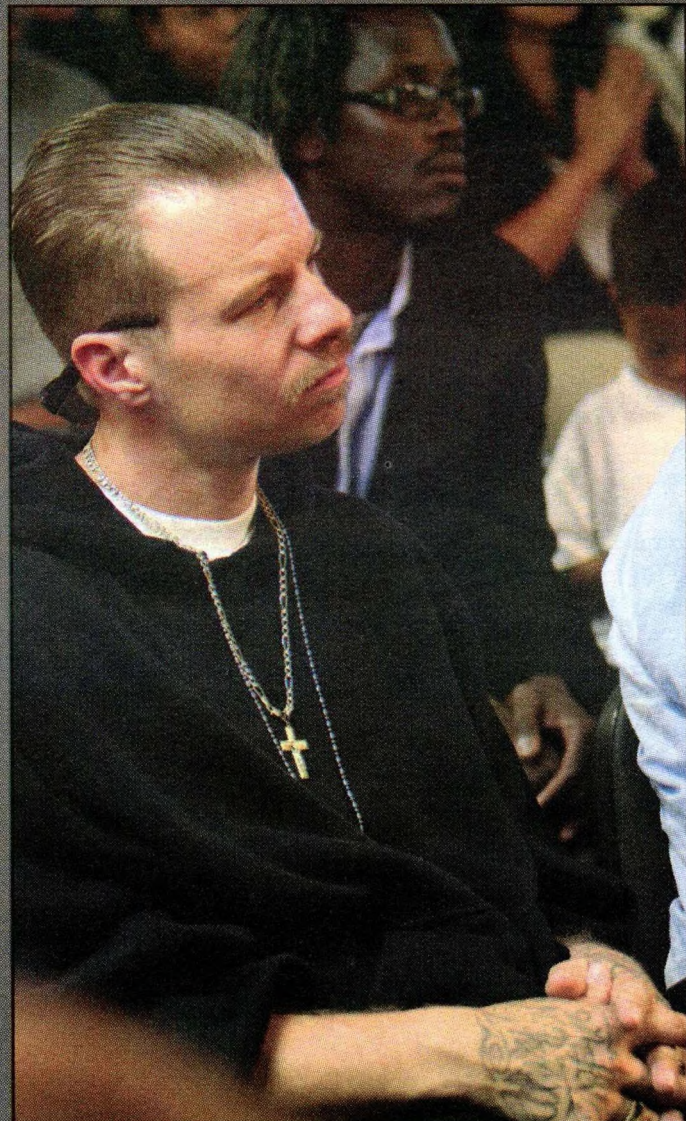
Lewis won a California

Peace Prize in 1995 and the Positive Image Award in 1992 for his work with Free at Last, the drug-rehabilitation nonprofit he co-founded in 1994.

Lewis was killed at the age of 54 in a parking garage at Hillsdale Shopping Center after an argument with an as-yet-unknown assailant, according to police.

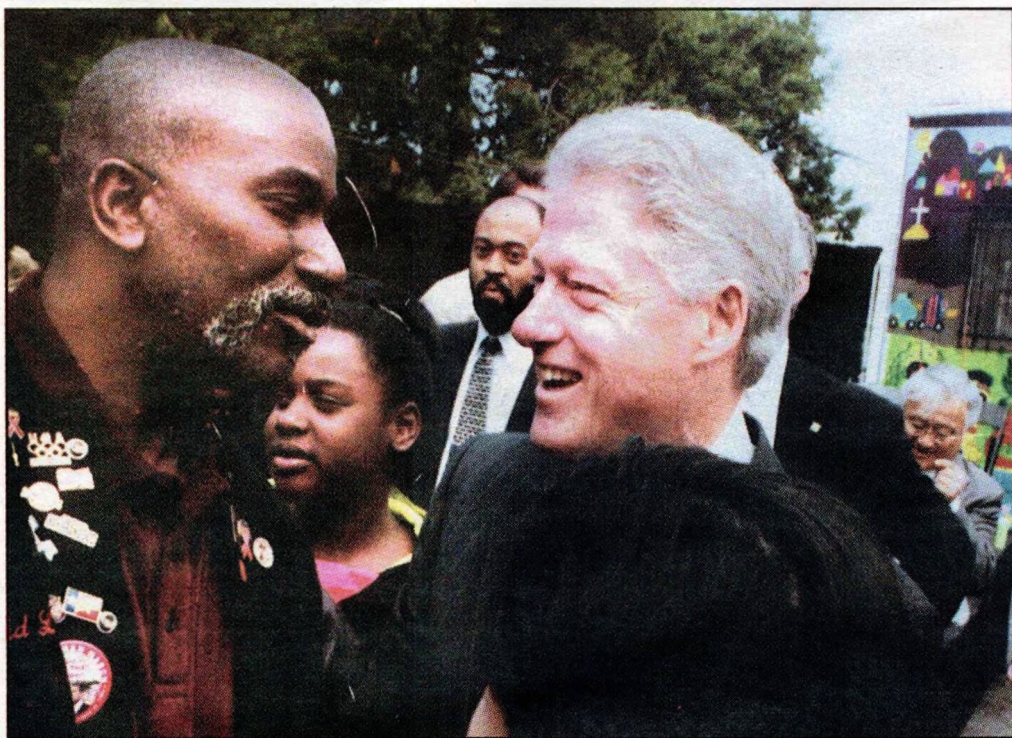
A single bullet through the back killed a man who many say led a singular life.

On Sunday, local residents and community leaders will mourn his death at a memorial service at Costano Elementary School in East



Veronica Weber

Joshua Mason — who was incarcerated with David Lewis and later worked with him in the For Youth By Youth program — attends a memorial gathering for Lewis June 10.



Courtesy of Free at Last

David Lewis meets President Bill Clinton during his visit to East Palo Alto in 2000.

Palo Alto, to be followed by a dinner and time of remembrance at Free at Last.

San Mateo police have released few details about his killing, except to say they believe he was targeted. Friends and colleagues say they have no idea why someone would kill Lewis. They deny he slipped back into activity that would have led to his demise.

The impact of the single bullet that took Lewis' life has reverberated around the world, colleagues say. His vision, which led to the creation of Free at Last and fundamentally shaped the innovative East Palo Alto Parolee Reentry Program, spread not only throughout the United States but to distant places such as Russia and Kenya, according to his friends.

Shocked by the news, people have called from France, Africa, Los Angeles and New York.

"The phone hasn't stopped ringing," said Dorsey Nunn, who co-founded Free at Last with Lewis and others and is now co-director of Legal Services for Prisoners with Children in San Francisco.

The transformative moment for Lewis came on Oct. 17, 1989, in his San Quentin prison cell — when the Loma Prieta earthquake struck.

Lewis was a big man, 6-foot-5 inches tall, and his friends say his presence could be intimidating. His prison photo — the last one taken before he had his epiphany — shows a man whose inner turmoil seems incalculable, his eyes seething with anger.

But when the ground rumbled through his maximum-security cell Lewis realized he didn't want to spend any more time in a cage, he told the Weekly in a September 1998 interview.

"I just had this overwhelming feeling of, 'I don't want to be in this situation anymore,'" he said.

Nunn said that desire for change, for redemption, was an underlying

part of Lewis' philosophy: Don't ever give up on someone.

Sometimes people will embrace identities they don't understand, Nunn said. But that doesn't mean they must stay in that role forever.

Lewis believed that to think that people cannot change is to short-change not only the individual but society as well, Nunn said.

"We don't know what we discard," he added.

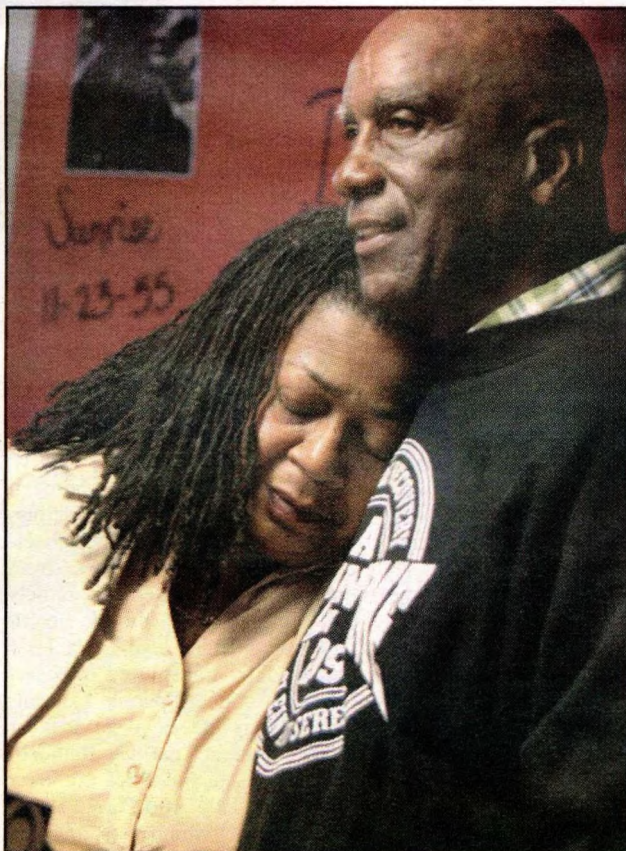
When Lewis exited prison in December 1989, it was to be for the last time. He kept his prison photo, which today hangs on the wall of his office, but Lewis never looked back.

He returned to East Palo Alto.

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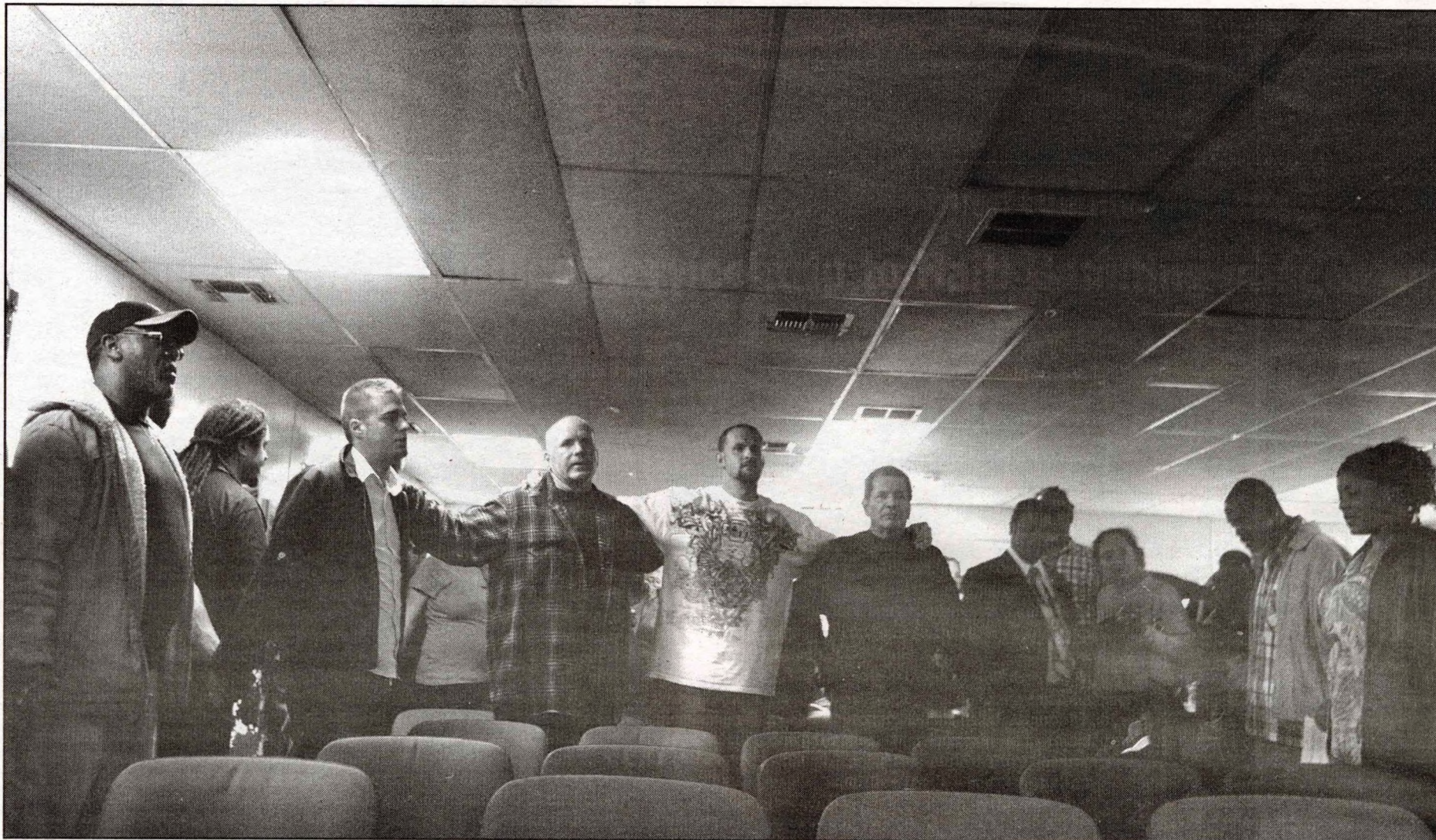
'He taught me the value of compassion and giving people a second chance.'

— Ronald Davis, police chief, East Palo Alto



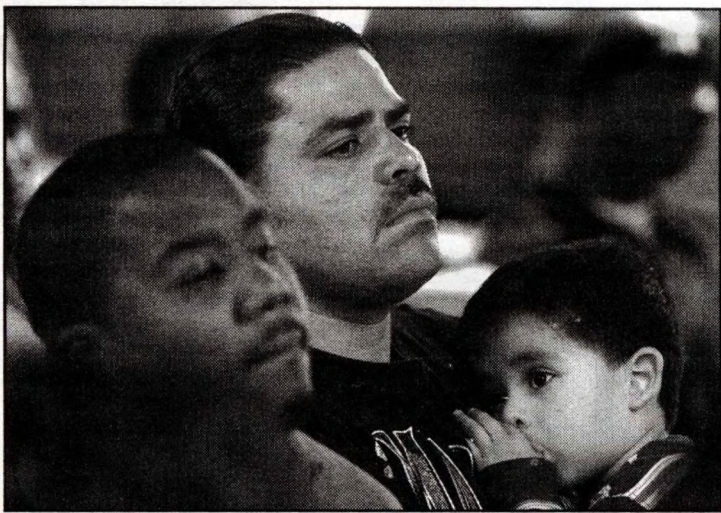
Veronica Weber

Former East Palo Alto Mayor Sharifa Wilson leans on East Palo Alto Parolee Reentry Program Director Bob Hoover during a remembrance of David Lewis' life last week.



Friends and colleagues touched by David Lewis' leadership hold hands in a prayer circle in honor of Lewis June 10, the day after he was killed.

Veronica Weber



Free at Last recovery-program participant Vicente Moreno, along with his young son, listens as others share memories of David Lewis in East Palo Alto June 10.

Veronica Weber

decided we wanted to do something different. We just wanted to see people heal; we wanted to see people happy. We wanted to see families together again," Smothers said.

Meeting in a small building on Pulgas Avenue that was tucked behind a junk yard, and with no money between them, Lewis, Nunn and others brainstormed ways to save East Palo Alto. They considered committing part of their own incomes to help people, but Lewis thought on a grander scale, Nunn said. Suddenly people with little education were writing grant proposals and learning how to run a nonprofit organization, he said. Free at Last was the third wave of Lewis' transformation after the earthquake and kicking the drug habit.

Free at Last's drop-in center was opened in East Palo Alto's Whiskey Gulch in 1994, amid the area's largest concentration of liquor stores and bars and drug use. Lewis thought putting a recovery center in the midst of the problem would make the services visible and attract a large number of people, according to Priya Haji, co-founder and former executive director.

"One hundred people came in the first day," she said.

Lewis' genius was in understanding that African American and Latino addicts needed to recover within the context of their culture, colleagues said.

Lewis saw that if the center were founded by people who lived in the community and who had the same experiences as their clients, more people could be reached. Many counselors were recovering addicts or had been incarcerated. For Latinos and African Americans, having

culturally relevant treatment made recovery more effective.

"It shifted the model," Haji said.

Lewis and Haji had envisioned a community-run recovery center at a time when recovery models didn't include a community-based approach, said Cheryl Dorsey, a board member of Echoing Green, a New York-based nonprofit that provided initial funding for Free at Last. Echoing Green is a funder of emerging social entrepreneurs, such as Teach for America and Public Allies, with which First Lady Michelle Obama worked.

Lewis and Free at Last are in that class, she said.

"It was a truly innovative and groundbreaking model and a paradigm-shifting idea for community-based treatment and recovery. It was really transformative," she said.

Prior to that time, substance-abuse treatment followed the Betty Ford approach of checking someone into a clinic or putting them into the prison pipeline, she said.

Free at Last's holistic approach brings in mental-health counseling, transitional housing, 12-step meetings, a youth drop-in center, street outreach program to contact addicts and families and a mobile health van that includes testing for HIV and sexually transmitted diseases. Referrals connect people to treatment centers and social services.

After Free at Last was founded, Lewis became the chief architect of the East Palo Alto Parole Re-entry Program, which was founded in 2007 to help parolees to become integrated with society.

Lewis saw the same issues of recidivism with ex-cons as he did with drug addicts, said East Palo Alto po-

lice Chief Ronald Davis. Parolees come out of prison with no money, jobs, sometimes limited education and often no housing, leading them to return to crime, Davis said.

Just six months after his release from prison, Alberto Alvarez, a convicted felon, shot and killed Officer Richard May. Lewis felt the tragedy was symptomatic of the need to reintegrate parolees into the community by providing services, Davis said.

Lewis believed the same approach to drug rehabilitation could apply to re-integration.

Lewis "was my mentor of the re-entry concept. He had a personal and professional impact on me. As a friend, he taught me the value of compassion and giving people a second chance," Davis said.

With help from California Assemblyman Ira Ruskin, Davis secured state funding for a 3.5-year pilot program to help recently released incarcerated persons.

"The East Palo Alto community embraced the program as a core value," Davis said, which led to its success.

East Palo Alto parolees had a notoriously high return-to-custody rate, above the 70-percent recidivism rate for parolees in a state-run program. But using the community model, East Palo Alto's re-entry program has only about a 20-percent return-to-custody rate, Davis said.

"But it's more than just the numbers. There is a symbolic value that the city and police department are involved. The community sees the department is holistic in its approach. It has a lot of benefits and a profound effect on the community," he said.

'We just wanted to see people heal; we wanted to see people happy. We wanted to see families together again.'

—Vicki Smothers, co-founder and vice president, Free at Last

David Lewis

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At the time, it was a city at war with itself, trapped by a deadly combination of drugs, poverty, racism, social chaos and lack of job opportunities. In 1992, 42 people were murdered, earning the city the dubious title of "per-capita murder capital" of the United States.

An Urban Health Study found that the city had the highest incidence of HIV infection among intravenous drug users of any city west of Chicago.

Lewis and others, who were then free of the chain of addiction, decided they had to give back to the community they loved, said Vicki Smothers, Free at Last vice president and co-founder.

"The crack epidemic was devastating. We were losing people. We

Davis credits Free at Last and the Parole Reentry Program for crime reduction in the city.

"It is increasing hope and potential. If you are now working and providing for your family you are less likely to return to crime. It has generational effects. Their kids will have a second chance," Davis said.

Lewis also sought to help people through his work in San Mateo County's STD/HIV program. John Conley, San Mateo County director of public-health services, said Lewis was one of the first outreach workers in a program who went into the prisons to assess the needs of parolees prior to release.

Lewis never gave up on a client, he said.

When Conley came to the job in 1996, there was discussion about limiting the number of times a client should be put in treatment, he said. But Conley said he believed that addicts with HIV should be put into treatment programs as many times as necessary until recovery would stick. Lewis gave that model his full support, Conley said.

"The force of David's personality and talking to people to give it another chance" worked to get many addicts who had given up hope to go into recovery and prevented transmission of HIV, he said.

Many HIV inmates refused to be tested and therefore went untreated out of fear of the stigma and what that would mean if they returned to prison. Lewis would talk to inmates to get them to be tested and receive medical care, Conley said.

"I am convinced that many are alive today because of him. His living legacy is the scores of people who are alive and would not be if it were not for him," Conley said.

Shortly after his death, Lewis' voice still proclaimed his drug-free message on his answering machine:

"Don't ever take nothin' — no matter what."

It's the kind of message he would want people to take with them as they mourn his death, Smothers said at a memorial on June 10.

Nunn said Lewis was a humble man who would not have realized just how huge his impact has been.

"I don't think many times people are as appreciated as much in the community as they should be," Nunn said.

"The community is just now recognizing how huge he was. What's going on now would've really startled him." ■

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Memorial service for David Lewis

A memorial for David Lewis is scheduled for Sunday (June 20) at 2 p.m. at Costano Elementary School, 2695 Fordham St. in East Palo Alto. The service will be followed by a dinner and time of remembrance at 5 p.m. at the offices of the nonprofit Free at Last, 1796 Bay Road. For information about the memorial service, call the office of Free at Last, 650-462-6999.