



Veronica Weber

East Palo Alto Parolee Reentry Program Director Bob Hoover reflects on the life and work of David Lewis at a remembrance event held at Free at Last headquarters last week.

## Innovative parolee program faces uncertain future

Re-entry program that David Lewis helped create is closing June 30 due to funding woes

by Sue Dremann

Vicente Moreno could have turned back to the streets when he finished his prison term, but a program that slain East Palo Alto community leader David Lewis helped create saved him, he said.

"When I got out of prison I had nothing. I was struggling to find a job. My shoes were ragged walking everywhere trying to find work," he said.

Moreno has a small son and was determined to stay out of prison. He also wanted to marry his son's mother, but he had no money or prospects, he said.

"With this help, I got some relief," he said, recalling the food and transitional housing he received through the East Palo Alto Parolee Reentry Program. He was able to earn enough money working at Safeway and for Caltrans to marry his sweetheart and provide for his family, he said.

Moreno will soon start a job with San Mateo County in human resources, where "they don't care about my record. I'm going to work real hard," he said.

The Parolee Reentry Program, launched in 2007, assesses the needs of residents returning to East Palo Alto from prison and works to reintegrate them into the community by addressing the root causes of criminal behavior and providing access and referrals to substance-abuse treatment, mental health and support groups, computer and job-skills training, educational opportunities, transitional housing, medical care and other services.

Lewis was the chief architect of the program, according to East

Palo Alto police Chief Ronald Davis. California Assemblyman Ira Ruskin introduced Assembly Bill 2436, which provided \$3.4 million (\$949,000 annually) to run the pilot program.

In 2009, the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) partnered with the program to hire parolees in a 14-month pilot job program.

The re-entry program has been highly successful, Davis said, keeping a much greater percentage of parolees from returning to a life of crime than average.

Corey Bell is a soft-spoken man who served a 20-year sentence in prison. Coming out was like living in a Rip Van Winkle world, one filled with computers and cell phones and other technologies that didn't exist when he went into prison. Bell said he'd heard about the re-entry program while still incarcerated and felt he was ready to tackle the challenge.

"When I walked out of prison, I knew I wasn't going back," he said.

He's been at the center, located at Free at Last for 18 months, showing up daily to take classes and learn computer skills "for my future," he said. Since arriving, he has gone to truck-driving school and earned his forklift license. Soon, he might have a job with a concrete company, he said.

"I want people to know that a lot of inmates really do come out with their head on right," he said. Having zero opportunities makes staying straight that much harder, he said.

"You don't know when their spirits are broken," he said of parolees. "Give them the opportunity to change their lives."

For all its success, however, the program faces a cloudy future.

Lewis' untimely shooting death on June 9 has left Bob Hoover, director of the program, deeply concerned about the program's long-term viability.

"About three to four weeks ago, (Lewis) said, 'We need to find more money to keep the project open, even if the state won't pay for it.' He was trying to use his connections. Now I don't know what we'll do," Hoover said, sitting in a meeting room at Free at Last, the drug-rehabilitation center that Lewis co-founded.

The re-entry program needs about \$450,000 a year, which includes providing transitional housing, he said. Hoover hopes someone will help establish a long-lasting base of support to continue Lewis' legacy regardless of state funding.

On June 10, Hoover, along with scores of others, gathered for an impromptu memorial for Lewis. Ironically, the meeting was originally scheduled to announce the closure of the program on June 30, after 3.5 years of funding by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

State funding is expected to be restored, for a two-year period. But the program won't reopen until at least September and when it does, rather than being community-based, the program will be regional and will serve parolees throughout San Mateo County, said Brian Lee, police

department liaison.

Parolees said they rely on the program's continuity. They have thrived under the community-based model that offers support and counseling. Some are also recovering from issues such as childhood abuse, according to Dolores Ferrell, counselor case manager at the Day Reporting Center (DRC).

Ferrell said she worries that the break in services from July to September will affect clients in transition.

"Some clients are very vulnerable. I worry that we've given them enough tools to work through. This is the refuge spot," she said.

Gustavo Pulido is one such client. His "road to recovery" still isn't yet that smooth, he said.

Closing the program will make it harder without the support of counselors who have provided continuity, he said.

Pulido, who was known as "Ogre" during his prison days, is proud he has left that persona behind. Now he is just "Mr. Pulido."

A large man with powerful, tattooed arms, he takes classes with titles such as "Enlightenment" and "Anger Management." When he got out of prison, Pulido was starving. He has five children to support. The Caltrans job program put money in his pocket, and sometimes he can take his children to the movies, he said.

Getting a job has been challenging, he said. Employers are impressed by his demeanor and attitude, but his rap sheet of drug arrests trips him up.

"It's discouraging. I could walk down to the street corner and get a pound of meth right now to sell before I get a job. The crack spots are one block away. I could either go to the corner or go to the DRC. I'd rather go to the DRC," he said.

The re-entry program is about setting a higher standard for oneself, he said.

"Now I know my self worth and I'm worth more than that," he said.

Part of re-entry includes doing community service as reparations for damaging the community. On Tuesday afternoon, the three men painted and repaired Free at Last's aging exterior. Sometimes, they talk to school children about their experiences.

Their community involvement is part of Lewis' legacy, Ferrell said. She looked at the men appreciatively.

"We are building the next generation of David Lewises," she said. ■

— Sue Dremann

### About the cover:

David Lewis received national recognition for his leadership roles in the East Palo Alto community. Lewis was fatally shot June 9 in San Mateo. File photo by Norbert von der Groeben.