

Living Free on the Central Coast

Mike Nelson seeks out second chances for youth offenders in the Central Coast's prison system by building mentorship programs geared towards bringing them fulfilled lives.

By Judy Salamacha



Photo by Jon Pearson

Sunday, June 7, 2020, Mike Nelson celebrated his second year free from prison. The 36-year-old had earned parole after serving 20.5-years of a life sentence. His parole was to begin June 6, but he chose to stay another day to give up Eddie, the puppy he trained most days and nights for two years to become a service-dog for former San Luis Obispo policeman Greg Gallo, who lives with PTSD.

“Working with Eddie I learned some valuable lessons for life outside,” said Nelson. “He is a big part of why I felt drawn to move to the Central Coast. Eddie prepared me to listen to my gut and follow what I know to feel true.” The experience also introduced Nelson to brothers inside and supportive friends outside.

“The quality of my life today is due to the relationships I have formed - many as a result of my experience with Eddie,” he said.

However, long before bonding with Eddie, Nelson “...went on survival mode,” including taking advantage of self-help and college level classes offered while at San Quentin. “The most important thing I did to prepare myself for the possibility of parole was to really do the introspective work that allowed me to have a deeper awareness of myself - my triggers, thoughts, beliefs and values.”

Once paroled, he explored career opportunities in San Francisco and the Central Coast, including developing his current dog training service. His “gut” keeps leading him back to his work with humans - coaching youth offenders like himself to “...live life with accountability and commitment.” He ultimately hopes to reach out to troubled youth heading towards outcomes Nelson knows all too well. “I don’t have all the answers, but I can help them discover who they are and hope to become.”

AMBIANCE | LIFESTYLE | FUNCTION



TWO GREAT SHOWROOMS

139 W. BRANCH ST.
ARROYO GRANDE
CA 93420
805.668.2424

214 WEST MAIN ST.
VISALIA
CA 93291
559.622.0987

Marcela's
Home Store

LIVING ROOM - DINING ROOM - BEDROOM - HOME OFFICE

WWW.MARCELASHOMESTORE.COM



A New Beginning

In 2012, Nelson was one of eight men incarcerated at San Quentin, who co-founded Kid (Creating Awareness Together) C.A.T., a program that prepares incarcerated individuals to grow through education, mentorship and restorative practices while they're in prison, as well as when they transition from California Department of Corrections & Rehabilitation. In September 2019, it achieved 501c3 status and Nelson assumed the position of Executive Director.

After studying hundreds of programs, they realized their perspective was unique. They lived daily with issues that needed to be discussed yet ignored in other self-help programs.

He expanded Kid C.A.T. to CMC and until COVID-19 locked out volunteers, he led weekly group sessions and trained potential new trainers. "Kid C.A.T. is a successful program, graduating over 400 participants from its self-help class, The First Step. We have raised funds for organizations that serve youth, sponsored events to create awareness about youth issues, and have contributed our voices to impact dialogue on restoration and healing. I made a commitment to my co-founders to see this through. Now that I am paroled, my life has grown, but I'm deeply committed to the men inside."



Finding Community on the Central Coast

Four Kid C.A.T. team members currently live and work on the Central Coast. Like Nelson, Luis Venegas, Solomon Kim, Kristopher Blehm, and Wesley Bird are youth offenders – now brothers who lived 12 to over 25 years incarcerated. Together they experienced training and graduating New Life K9 puppies at CMC before parole.

“Being found suitable (for parole) was the happiest moment for me,” said Kim. “I was a follower. Kid C.A.T. gave me space to be me. New Life K9s allowed me to practice all that I learned throughout my journey, notably, patience. My brothers are my family and give me love and support.” He values his Walmart position while continuing his education at Cuesta College to become a drug abuse counselor.

Venegas earned his AA in Sociology. “I had done work on myself to become a better human being by the time I joined New Life K9s. Within it, I lived it on a day to day basis.” The training earned him his “first-ever job” as a host at Thousand Hills Pet Resort.

Blehm nears finishing his college degree while working at Tractor Supply SLO. “Helping people is something I’m called to do,” said Blehm.

Bird is also college trained, but the skill he perfected while inside was his artistic eye for animal portraits. Since 2018 his art has been displayed at Morro Bay’s Top Dog Coffee Bar. “I have had a huge amount of help – from family, friends, co-workers, and complete strangers. I know I will be training dogs and hopefully working hard as a commercial artist.”

Simple kindnesses and activities became treasured memories while on their reentry journeys. “The moments that stand out for me,” said Venegas, “are when my sister visited and showed me how to clean a bathroom properly or when

Mike [Nelson] allowed me to use his car to practice driving when I only had my permit.”

On his first day of freedom, Nelson had to see Morro Rock since a New Life K9s weekend puppy parent showed him pictures of service-dogs-in-training romping near Morro Bay’s restorative anchorage. An In-N-Out Burger was a must-try, but now snuggled into his own apartment, he “craves childhood favorites – recipes passed down from my [Japanese] great-grandparents.”

Venegas and Kim wanted to see the “majestic” ocean, but for Venegas enjoying a family pizza at Woodstock’s came first. Blehm and Bird preferred, “...anywhere away from prison.” Blehm went shopping with his sister and Nelson. Bird needed to see the New Life K9s facility and spend time with Patrick Bietz and Suzanne Maury, owners of Top Dog Coffee Bar.

Currently working part-time at Top Dog Coffee Bar, Nelson said, “[Pat and Suzanne] have been there for each of us. A strong support network is critical to make it through reentry.”

There have been disappointments along the way; living in San Francisco was not as satisfying for Nelson as he had hoped. “People seemed disconnected and rushed with very little space to connect with one another.”

Both Kim and Venegas planned every detail only to learn protocols often over-ride plans. In prison, Blehm learned transparency and trust among his brothers, but discovered “transparency [outside] is not as appreciated or even wanted or accepted.” Yet, his Kid C.A.T. training convinced him, “I’m going to succeed...I didn’t get a second chance to waste it.”

“Every day is a reward,” said Nelson, “...every relationship... every conflict...every new experience...every chance to go back inside prison as a free person. Life is a reward – one I do not take for granted today.”

So how did Nelson celebrate freedom on his two-year anniversary? He chose a quiet dinner at Tognazzini’s Dockside Too – In full view of Morro Rock – sharing fish and chips with CJ, another puppy who has captured his heart.



**THIESSEN
DESIGN**
CUSTOM METAL WORKS

RESIDENTIAL | COMMERCIAL
SIGNAGE | FURNITURE
PUBLIC & CORPORATE ART
FORGING

thiessendesign.com

200 Suburban Rd #G, SLO CA
(805) 547-1947

LIC# 946175

LOCALLY OWNED & OPERATED FOR OVER 21 YEARS



A HISTORY OF EXCELLENCE