

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/realizing-my-dreams-in-nyc>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

As I reflect upon my previous life where I was confined for up to 22 and half hours per day to an 8-by-10 foot prison cell in the Security Housing Unit at Pelican Bay State Prison in Crescent City, California, I recall that I would often get lost in my thoughts hopelessly dreaming that one day I would live in New York City after my release. Although I did not have a clue of how I would make this dream come true, I just knew that it was something that I wanted. At the same time, I understood that opportunities that would allow me to make this dream come true would be limited to me, because of my status as a formerly incarcerated person. Knowing this reality that, as a formerly incarcerated person, it was legally permissible to be denied access to basic resources such as housing, employment, health care, and food stamps I was forced to put my dream aside after my release and focus on transitioning back into society after 14 years of incarceration.

Immediately after my release from prison on January 19, 2010, I decided to complete what I started while in solitary confinement, which was my associate's degree. I enrolled into Cerritos College in Norwalk, California, where I eventually found a support system among faculty, academic counselors, staff members, and students who encouraged me to pursue my bachelor's degree from the University of California, Berkeley. As a formerly incarcerated student, having this support system was vital for my success, and this support system was not limited to academics. It was through my support system at Cerritos College that I obtained my first stable job working at the student support center; this job allowed me to see myself as a resource to other students which is something I want to be for other formerly incarcerated students.

After transferring to UC Berkeley in the fall of 2012, I was vocal about my past experience with incarceration and solitary confinement. I wanted to use my past experience as a platform to advocate for those who were presently and formerly incarcerated. At UC Berkeley, I participated in the creation of the Underground Scholars Initiative, an organization for students who have been directly impacted by the prison industrial complex. Being part of the Underground Scholars Initiative allowed me to expand on my vision of being a resource to formerly incarcerated students; it also instilled in me the belief that a critical education is a powerful tool for transformation and rehabilitation.

The John W. Gardner Fellowship for Public Service has given me the opportunity to work with two organizations that are providing education to presently and formerly incarcerated people. The Vera Institute of Justice in New York City and the Mountainview Program at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey. My role as a program analyst at Vera will be working under the Center on Sentencing and Corrections, which is taking the lead on [Pathways](#), a project that provides incentive funding and technical assistance to three states (Michigan, New Jersey, and North Carolina) to expand access to higher education for those who are presently and formerly incarcerated. This project seeks to demonstrate that access to postsecondary education, combined with supportive reentry services, can increase educational credentials, reduce recidivism, and increase employability and earnings to formerly incarcerated people.

It is my role as a completion counselor at the Mountainview Program at Rutgers University that I am most excited about. The Mountainview Program and its associated student organization (MVP-SO) promote campus awareness regarding incarceration, recidivism, criminal justice, and the benefits of higher education. I will be working directly with formerly incarcerated students who are transitioning back into society after their release from incarceration within the New Jersey Department of Corrections. I feel blessed to be in a position where I am able to be a resource to formerly incarcerated students who seek to transform their lives through education, in the same fashion that my support system at Cerritos College did for me.

At the same time, through the John W. Gardner Fellowship, I am able to make my dream come true of living in New York City...although technically I am living in Jersey City. But it's a lot closer to the Big Apple than the torture chambers of the Security Housing Unit at Pelican Bay State Prison!

This post was [originally published](#) on Matsui Center News, the official blog of the Robert T. Matsui Center at UC Berkeley.

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