

Former SCC inmate credits job-training programs with helping him land job after release

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CRM Dameion Renault, left, speaks to former inmate Kamarlo Spooner at SCC. Spooner credits the job-training programs at SCC with helping him land his first carpentry job after his release.

**By Lt. Robert Kelsey, AA/PIO
Sierra Conservation Center**

A former state prison inmate volunteers his time to help others steer clear of the criminal path he followed and to let incarcerated people know they have chances to better themselves inside the walls. Today, because he took advantage of the rehabilitative programs in the state prison system, he's successfully facing life.

Kamarlo Spooner never imagined that speaking to individuals about the trials he faced in his life would be the catalyst to empower, motivate and transform the lives of others. Through his encouraging words and stories about his life, others find hope in their own circumstances.

He started out selling marijuana and eventually crack cocaine. Though he was involved in criminal activities, he continued to attend school and eventually graduated from high school. He had the mental fortitude to obtain a job, but the greed of money along with the fun of the streets kept him involved in the drug trade.

In 2003, he was arrested for fraud and given probation. Later that same year, he was nabbed for embezzlement. Then he was busted for possessing drugs and firearms. He was given another short stay in county jail. Then, he was arrested again and his short stints were over. He was sentenced to six years in state prison. He was transferred to San Quentin and High Desert State Prison. The last 23 months of his incarceration were spent at Sierra Conservation Center in Jamestown.

Spooner said he was sexually abused as a child and his mother abused drugs and often abandoned her children in the middle of the night.

"There were so many days I would stay up until 2 or 3 a.m. waiting on my mother to return home from being on one of her drug binges," he recalls. "Imagine staying up this late, then having to wake yourself up for school, dress yourself for school and leave for school with an empty stomach. I did this for years."

His mother's crack addiction put him and his siblings in horrible living conditions. At times they didn't have electricity, running water or food. By the time he was 17 years old, his family had lived in 17 different apartments, five motels, two shelters and a drug rehab facility.

When he was 8 years old, he was introduced to crack by means of the older drug dealers. They would pay his mother in drugs, so she would allow Spooner to hold their drug money in his pocket as they collected it from the users on the corner. Spooner's father was somewhat a part of his life, but he was a functional alcoholic, who became violent on a daily basis.

While sitting in prison, he came up with a sort of motto: "prison is not an option, yet it is still a choice." That quote is a way of life that he continues to live by to this day. Once he was transferred to Sierra Conservation Center, he enrolled into the carpentry program. After obtaining some skills in carpentry, he transferred out of carpentry and into auto mechanics.

He quickly picked up some skills in that trade and once again he transferred programs but this time he went into welding.

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"I knew that I was going to be heading back into society and unfortunately felons are not received with many open hands," he said. "I wanted to learn every trade that I could, so that I could give myself the best possible opportunity to become gainfully employed."

He was released from prison on Dec. 27, 2007, and received his first job three weeks later as a carpentry apprentice.

He is quick to tell all who will listen that the carpentry program that he took part in while at Sierra Conservation Center is what helped him obtain his first job. He did not become complacent, he studied the DMV commercial driver's handbook while working as a carpentry apprentice and passed the written test. After receiving his commercial permit, he applied for a job as a truck driver.

He was hired at the trucking company and his annual salary doubled. He also went back to college and looks to obtain four different AA degrees in the fall of 2017. He is currently employed as a garbage truck driver for one of the local companies in the bay area as well as an advocate for at-risk individuals.

He is a motivational speaker who volunteers his time by returning to the same prison where he last served time – Sierra Conservation Center.

He said inspiring and motivating inmates is fulfilling. He also has volunteered his time by speaking to the participants of the Oakland Midnight Basketball League and to the Kevin Grant Foundation, encouraging them to stay clear of anti-social pursuits. He is Vice-Chair of the Alameda County Advisory Board AB 109 Realignment/Reentry.

Some of the duties and responsibilities of the board is to provide advice, make recommendations and provide a community perspective on the implementation and outcomes of the County's Realignment plan to a committee of public officials comprising the Chief Probation Officer, the Sheriff, District Attorney, Public Defender, Healthcare Director, a representative of the Courts and a local Police Chief.

One of his goals is to start a program inside CDCR that teaches inmates how to obtain a commercial driver's license. It is his belief and experience that trucking companies will hire ex-felons and one can make a great living by driving trucks.