

# CCWF PAPER TRAIL

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## CCWF Residents Acknowledge Exceptional Staff with the Clover Awards

By Vegas Bray

As the Beyond Violence Mentor Program (BVMP) at Central California's Women's Facility (CCWF) held its first-ever Clover Awards Ceremony, attendees wanted to know: Who's feeling lucky?

"The Clover Awards are a movement," said retired Chief Deputy Warden and BVMP coordinator Velda Dobson-Davis. "It is a staff morale booster with nominations from incarcerated individuals for staff they deem to be outstanding."

With the awards, Dobson-Davis hopes to honor staff "who consistently rise above and beyond maintaining order and security."

The event began at 11 a.m. on March 17, 2026, with staff from across the institution in attendance. Approximately 264 residents were also scheduled to attend to show their support for the staff they nominated.

"There were four guiding principles [integrity, care, safety, and community] and I wanted an emblem that was positive," said Dobson-Davis. "The clover is legendary and symbolic of positive efforts."

The festivities were led by the event's emcee Michele Kane, deputy director of California Correctional Training and Rehabilitation Authority, and opened with a prayer given by Rabbi Paul Gordon.

Out of 160 staff members nominat-

ed, 15 finalists for the Clover Awards were announced. As each name was introduced, Cane made sure to include the contributing leadership skills listed by the residents who nominated them.

Many staff members were shy at the amount of cheers and praise they received as a Clover Nominee or as an Outstanding Team Member. Nathan Bibb, plant operations painter, was the only non-custody staff member who made the top 15 list for a Clover Award.

"I must be doing my job the right way because I'm being recognized by staff and population," said Bibb. "You guys [residents] are all human too and should be treated fairly."

From the 15 finalists, there could only be five Clover Award winners. Shouts of approval thundered through the gym as Dobson-Davis called each of the five winners: C/O M. Phipps, C/O B. Bruffett, C/O T. Yang, C/O I. Mendoza, and C/O J. Sahagun.

Resident Keisha Smith felt proud of Building 509's win. "I was very surprised that my staff made the final five spots," she said. "C/O Mendoza is great, and C/O Phipps is awesome at problem-solving."

For Phipps, it is effortless to treat residents like human beings and give a little more patience to those who need it, especially after "being raised by nothing but women," he said.

"I don't ever come to work hoping to win awards, but it feels good to be recognized," Phipps said. "I'm humbled to be seen by the population."

The last speech was given by Dobson-Davis, who spoke on the benefits of the four guiding principles to staff. "I firmly believe if we honor those who do the right thing, the culture will change in CCWF," Dobson-Davis said.

At the end, now retired Public Information Officer Monique Williams presented Dobson-Davis with an award of her own. "Her intentional and exceptional work is why she is our nominee and choice for the Service Award," Williams said.



Photos by CCWF Paper Trail

Left: CCWF residents cheering for Clover Awards nominees

Right: Clover Award winner Correctional Officer Michael Phipps



From Left: Division of Adult Institutions (DAI) Deputy Director Jennifer Benavides, DAI Director Gena Jones, DAI Associate Director Kathleen Ratliff, CCWF Warden Anissa De La Cruz

## San Francisco District Attorney's Office Fosters Intervention and Healing

By Diana Lovejoy

A selected group of Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) residents met with representatives from the San Francisco District Attorney's (SFDA) office on Wednesday Feb. 25.

Part of the SFDA's Access to Hope initiative, the event aimed to give residents an opportunity to share their challenges, rehabilitation efforts, and ideas for crime intervention and reentry. This was the second visit to CCWF by the SFDA's office, and it follows a similar symposium series at the San Quentin Rehabilitation Center.

District Attorney Brooke Jenkins opened the day with a message of hope. "We want you to know as women that we hear you," said Jenkins. "You are more than your crime, and we hope that you stay positive."

Public Information Officer Lieutenant Monique Williams relayed her support for the initiative as the entire group was seated together in a large circle, and encouraged residents to share why they were here. The CCWF group was comprised of prisoners with serious crimes and long term or life sentences.

...CONTINUED ON PAGE 5

2

VICTIM AWARENESS

Building healthier communities

4

WOMEN IN GANGS

Why women join?

6

A CHAPLAIN'S CALLING

How Sister Melissa shepherds her flock

8

APRIL FOOLS

CCWF's got jokes

## EDITORIAL

# The Importance of Victim Awareness



Photo courtesy of Diana Rayos

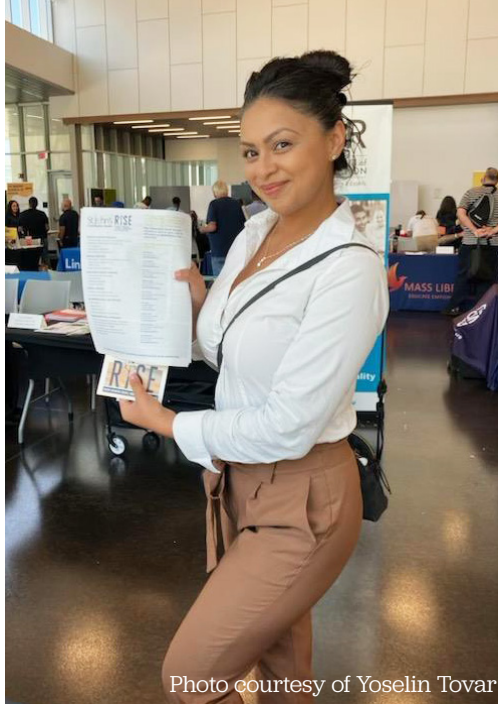


Photo courtesy of Yoselin Tovar

Left: Diana Rayos with founder of Homeboy Industries Father Gregory Boyle and a youth participant  
Right: Yoselin Tovar volunteering her time at a resource fair

## By Guadalupe Barragan

Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) honors our victims in the month of April. We stand together with the Office of Justice Programs (OJP), which honors victims of a crime during National Crime Victims Rights Week (NCVRW) from April 19-25, 2026.

Every year, many communities inside and outside come together in solidarity and commemoration for victims. This movement builds stronger communities between victim survivors and supporters.

CCWF is also encouraging a safe place for healing, restoration, and recovery for victims and survivors. We understand the great magnitude of our actions.

Victims suffer great loss. Their lives have been destroyed and impacted physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, or financially. Families missing a parent, child, or sibling. Individuals who no longer feel safe at home. The strain of financial burdens that come from medical or funeral bills. The mental weight of bullying. The ripple of effect is endless.

We at CCWF have adversely impacted many lives, and unfortunately, some even continue this vicious cycle in prison. Our own peers become victims of bullying or abusive behaviors. However, many of our peers have also developed personal growth and maturity. This pathway opens the door to responsibility, accountability, and transformation.

One good example of living amends is Diana Rayos, who served 13 years in CCWF. During her incarceration, Rayos honored her victims by making positive choices thereby lessening the impact of her past actions. Rayos attended various self-help groups that primarily focused on victim impact, and participated in Victim Awareness Walk-A-Thons when they were offered.

As incarcerated persons we also victimized our families. They are impacted financially by paying attorney costs or court fees. Our family is burdened by other expenses such as commissary, canteen, quarterly packages, sale items, and visits.

People find meaning and purpose by practicing restorative justice principles. This is a choice people make to repair the damage they have done by giving back to their communities.

Rayos paroled in 2021. Since then, she continues making amends by teaching against gang violence and mentoring at-risk youth between ages 14-18. Rayos is a case manager for Homeboy Industries.

Her responsibilities include attending court hearings, as well as speaking with probation officers or the Department for Children Schools and Families providing comprehensive support for teens struggling with a criminal lifestyle.

"By sharing my story, I'm able to discourage others from a life of crime. I express good moral intent to bring awareness and consequential thinking. I understand the importance on building healthier communities and encouraging the youth to make better choices in life," Rayos said.

Yoselin Tovar was incarcerated for thirteen and a half years in CCWF. During the flu outbreak and COVID pandemic, Tovar volunteered by working long hours in the Kitchen and Canteen while managing a full time job.

Additionally, Tovar volunteered her time in the Gifted Hands Crochet Project and Pillowcase Dress Project. She spent many hours making dresses, blankets, beanies, and scarves for the outside community.

Her contribution benefited veteran's hospitals, children's hospitals, homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters, and other organizations. Upon release, Tovar continued rebuilding lives.

"Since the beginning, I was responsible for the negative ripple effect of my actions. Today, I am also responsible for the positive ripple effect in my life. I want to reach a multitude people by being of service. During Thanksgiving Day and Christmas, I volunteer with Ramp LA, Rise & Go, or St. Johns Community Health to feed unhoused individuals or pass out Christmas gifts," Tovar added.

Character building is an essential part to ending victimization anywhere. In prison, we can build each other with a smile and by being friendly, kind, and respectful. Small gestures, positive words or deeds can make a difference in this dark place.

For the month of April, the Paper Trail Editorial Board wants to challenge CCWF residents to join the NCVRW the week of 19-25 by honoring victims of crime. We encourage everyone to stop further victimization by making a change in your attitude and character.

## CCWF Paper Trail EST. 2024

CCWF PAPER TRAIL IS A PIONEERING PUBLICATION THAT SERVES THE LARGEST WOMEN'S PRISON IN THE WORLD. IT ENGAGES WITH COMMUNITY, PROMOTES HOPE, CREATES POSITIVE SOLUTIONS, AND AMPLIFIES VOICES RARELY HEARD.

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# CCWF Paper Trail Honors Our Trailblazing Partner

## CCWF's Public Information Officer Lt. Monique Williams is retiring and leaving big shoes to fill

### By the Editorial Board

How does someone say goodbye to a person who has helped ensure they have a voice? Who has been a source of support and encouragement? Who works to showcase the work you do and tells you that you matter?

That is the situation in which CCWF Paper Trail - and Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) - find themselves with the recent announcement that Lieutenant Monique Williams will retire on March 31, 2026.

Williams has been the Administrative Assistant/Public Information Officer (AA/PIO) to Warden Anissa De La Cruz since De La Cruz took office. As Williams has said on many occasions, one of the first things De La Cruz did upon becoming warden was to instruct her to contact Pollen Initiative's (PI) Jesse Vasquez so a newspaper could be produced within CCWF. Williams enthusiastically took up the challenge and, as a result, CCWF Paper Trail came to be.

But beyond bringing a newspaper to the institution, Williams has brought her kindness and love to both staff and the population of CCWF. She frequently tours the facility, stopping to speak with individuals she knows as well as anyone who asks a question or says hello. Both staff and incarcerated people feel comfortable speaking with her because of her innate humanity and spirituality.

Williams also has the gift of making people feel both seen and heard. That is a rare talent for anyone, let alone someone who is tasked with being the warden's right hand. But Williams simply does here what she does anywhere - which is how it comes so naturally and feels genuine for those with whom she interacts.

This is especially true for CCWF Paper Trail's staff members. During meetings and tours we have with various outside agencies, Williams consistently tells us to speak up and reminds us that we have a seat at the table; take advantage of it. "Your voice matters," she has said on numerous occasions.

Being the AA/PIO is not an easy job. It requires diplomacy and tact with staff, the incarcerated population, and the media. It requires having an understanding of everything going on inside the institution, all of the various policies and procedures that are in place, and a relationship with individuals at various levels within the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

For CCWF Paper Trail, Williams has been our supervisor since before the newspaper was even born. She has walked this journey

with us and has both celebrated our successes and shared some of our frustrations. During our graduations, she is always in attendance, even stepping in as emcee at the last minute for our first and giving a passionate speech for our second. She has supported the events we have sponsored and cosponsored to help spread the word about our publication and the value of having a community newspaper. And she does her best to bring tours through the media center to spotlight how CCWF is trying to level the playing field when it comes to hearing incarcerated women's viewpoints.

Prior to our first journalism guild graduation, PI staff and volunteers worked tirelessly to have CCWF Paper Trail's first issue in print to pass out to participants. CCWF Paper Trail editorial advisor Kate McQueen remembered the moment when the first issue of Paper Trail was delivered to the Warden's office. Williams took her copy and was immediately overcome with emotion, bursting into tears of joy as she clutched it to her chest.

Seeing our stories and names in print during the graduation ceremony was a moment of intense pride for us; Williams felt that same pride. After the event was complete, she approached every person with a story in print and asked them to sign her copy of the paper. "You are history in the making," she told us.

Williams will leave some extremely big shoes for the next AA/PIO to fill. But, because Williams is who she is, she will spend considerable time with whoever that person is to both ensure they are successful and that De La Cruz' vision for CCWF can be implemented. Both of those things are certain - just as it is certain that Monique Williams will be missed.

We wish you all the best, Lieutenant Williams, and we hope to see you at some of our future events. Enjoy those grandbabies and husband!



Photos courtesy of CDCR

Photos of Lt. Monique Williams performing her duties in the capacity of Public Information Officer for CCWF and an advocate for human kindness



# Women and Gangs

What attracts them to gang culture is often specific to women and so is finding a way out once incarcerated

By Kanoa Harris-Pendang

Gang violence is prevalent in neighborhoods, affecting and changing the course of people's lives in an instant. So, what happens when those members end up in prison? And does it matter if those members are men or women?

The five women profiled in this article – all at one time residents of Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) – recognized the differences between male and female incarcerated gang members while trying to pursue a better way of life, change their belief systems, and understand their values. These women came from different walks of life, different parts of the state, and, most notably, different or rival gangs – on the streets, that is. And, unlike their male counterparts, women gang members coexist and even have pseudo-families while incarcerated.

## Why Women Join

A 2024 study by WestEd Justice & Prevention Research Center (JPRC) found that women join gangs for some of the same reasons as their male counterparts. Gangs can provide a source of income, security, excitement, family, street credibility, or protection from other gangs or neighborhood violence. In other words, gangs can offer a way to survive. Many people come to gangs through family members – they are brought up in it, married into it, or associated with it through their romantic partners. This last pathway is particularly relevant to women.

The JPRC study also states that female gang members experience an excessive amount of victimization early in life. Female gang members often have a history of physical and/or sexual abuse at home by older male figures who are either family members or family friends, and continue to experience abuse by their male counterparts upon entering the gang. According to the study, this form of victimization is rarely experienced by male gang members.

For Shachie Day, being part of a street gang allowed her to feel loved, supported, and escape the verbal abuse she suffered at home. Having older relatives who were gang members somewhat influenced her decision to join. But, ultimately, all she craved was the intimacy of family she felt the gang could provide.

Maria Alaniz, a former CCWF Paper Trail contributing writer, was first exposed to the gangs through her cousin, whom she remembered everyone admiring. But it was her boyfriends who brought her closer to the activities she found attractive.

Lacey Crenshaw was introduced to biker gangs at a young age by her mother. Eventually, her mother left, but the gang mentality still existed.

"I was brought up in poverty, we moved around a lot, it was the



Illustration by Canva AI

culture and the lifestyle," Crenshaw said.

As an adult, Crenshaw was married to a prison gang shot caller. She thrived from the power, control, and respect her husband had, even though women could not engage in gang activities. She remembers being attracted to the gang lifestyle for as long as she could remember.

Nancy Moreno's story is similar. Moreno came from a very dysfunctional family where she experienced neglect, abandonment, and rejection. She became romantically involved with a man 11 years her senior who was a part of a cartel.

"When this man came along, he was the first man to show me what I thought was love and belonging in a world of gangs, drugs, and power," Moreno said.

She immediately viewed him as her new family and had strong loyalties to him. Soon, Moreno started committing heinous crimes with him and his crew without remorse and without thinking of the consequences. For Moreno, the consequences were consecutive sentences of life without parole, life, and 20 years for crimes she committed when she was 18.

## The Complications of Gang-Affiliation in Prison

Male gang members often continue their gang activity while they are in prison. And as a result, the 28 Level I-IV men's facilities are plagued with prison politics and rules, separated by yards, levels, race, geographical location, and gang affiliation. According to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) Department Operations Manual, 52070.26, "gang-affiliated inmates shall be transferred in accordance with the CCR, Title 15, and the DOM on the basis of documented individual behavior and case needs."

It's a very different situation for women. When you land in a women's institution, that's just it – "you land" – in one of two facilities: CCWF or California Institution for Women (CIW), and you stay there. Prior to 2012, women could also be housed in Valley State Prison for Women (VSPW). CCWF houses every custody level, whereas CIW now houses lower-level offenders and other cases with the warden's approval. At CCWF, a Level I resident can be housed in the same eight-person cell with a Level IV. When there are issues inside rooms, residents must work through them unless there is a

“CCWF was real gang banging, although certain individuals were in relationships with rivals, neighborhoods stuck with neighborhoods. If they wasn't on it, I wasn't either,” Shachie Day said.

documented incident.

Most of the women interviewed came in with prior knowledge of and experience with the workings of prison, whether it be men's or women's prisons. Day, for one, said she was told to "stay strong, stay to yourself, don't allow anyone to give you anything, and don't get in anyone's business." These words were her saving grace for doing her time.

After being charged at 17 years old, Erica Hitchcock received a life sentence at age 19. A loyal member of her gang, she was schooled about prison; she was told it was just like the streets: "stick to your own homies and you'll be alright."

Once she entered prison, Hitchcock knew she had to acclimate and do it quickly. The life she was used to was no longer. Though she knew people where she was headed, she had to create her own path and start all over. She had made a name for herself in the streets; now she had to do the same in prison.

Hitchcock would soon find out that, unlike the men's prisons, there was no structure in a women's prison when it came to the gang lifestyle. No one was politicking. Everyone

was intermingling, housed with each other, and it was like “anything goes,” said Hitchcock.

There are no records to indicate the number of incidents that are classified as gang-related at any of the women’s facilities. From word of mouth, residents know that women do get jumped because of their gang involvement in the free world or prison, turning state’s evidence (turning on their gang), or claiming to be from a particular gang when they are not, amongst other reasons.

But, broadly speaking, there is no other option but to coexist in a women’s facility.

It took Alaniz a while to come to this realization, entering prison in 2006 at the age of 19. She had been a resident of all three California women’s institutions at one time or another. Though the three prisons had specific elements to them, CIW gang culture was run by sticking with your county, while VSPW was more integrated both with gangs and race.

“You seen interracial couples, Northerners and Southerners kicking it,” Alaniz recalled. “It was different than what I was brought up to believe it should be.”

Day found a different reality at CCWF.

“CCWF was real gang banging. Although certain individuals were in relationships with rivals, neighborhoods stuck with neighborhoods,” said Day. She admits that when she first arrived, she did not really interact with her rivals. “If they wasn’t on it, I wasn’t either.”

Something can be said about the bonds that are created when women are isolated in a farmland in the middle of nowhere together. They have similar internal and external struggles. They yearn for a visit from their family and children. After spending years behind electrified fences that have no mercy on a person, it is almost imperative to survival that commonalities start to be recognized and, if need be, challenged to achieve common goals.

It is not uncommon for women to seek pseudo-families to fulfill Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs: physiological, safety and security, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization. In a women’s prison, room dynamics can often mimic those of a family. So even if one is not a gang member, the mentality of the structure can be the same as a gang member’s mentality and belief system. This sense of a familial relationship may also serve to increase loyalty among members and non-members alike.

### Programming for Women

It took Alaniz multiple fights and two race riots to realize something in her life had to change. This was her “aha” moment.

That turning point was one of the last race riots she participated in; she found that it was those from different races who “had her back.” From that day forward, she said, “I realized people were just people and I had been operating from an ingrained belief system, not my own.”

She no longer looked at geographical location, racial backgrounds,

or cultural beliefs when forming friendships.

Alaniz started out by participating in Girls Advocating New Greatness (GANG) classes in the housing units. “No one wanted me in their groups because of my past,” said Alaniz, but Live, Learn, and Prosper gave her the opportunity to start a new journey of rehabilitation.

GANG was a program offered at CCWF to help women explore why they joined a gang, as well as avenues to look for a different, more prosocial way to live.

Criminal & Gang Members Anonymous (CGA) is offered in many of the CDCR prisons, including CCWF. CGA is a 12-step recovery program for criminals and gang members. Its philosophy is based on the obsession, compulsion, and progression addiction cycle.

The program’s primary purpose is to develop and practice a better

way of living free of destructive addictions and to reach out to help other criminals find a peaceful, productive way of living. Founded in the 1990’s by a man who only goes by the name Richard M., CGA provides its participants with 12 steps to recovery, 12 traditions to safety, 12 promises through recovery, and the

“I realized people were just people and I had been operating from an ingrained belief system, not my own,” said Maria Alaniz

CGA prayer.

Another program offered at CCWF is one that was created inside the facility: Gang Insight, Impact, and Prevention (GIIP). GIIP uses a variety of skills to reach everyone in their workshops, from worksheets to person-involved presentations. GIIP is broken into six weeks of workshops specific to gangs, and a participant must complete all six to graduate.

Alaniz paroled in January 2026 with plans to return to CCWF someday as a program provider or guest speaker to talk about her transition from a gang life to a productive member of society. Despite the life sentences each individual received, Hitchcock, Day, Crenshaw, and Moreno are all working toward their release.

“There’s always hope,” Moreno said. “I am far from perfect, but I can take pride in the person I am today. I can help create positive results for others with the mentoring I do.”



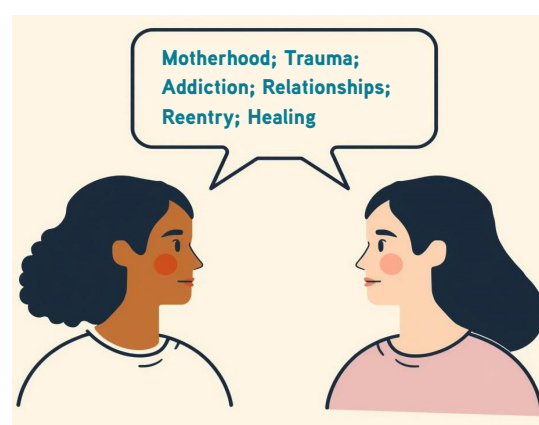
Illustration by Canva AI

### COVER STORY: SAN FRANCISCO. CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Public Information Officer to the District Attorney Randy Quezada described this event as “an opportunity to learn more about the impact of the system on individuals, and ways to improve that from the prosecutor’s side. It’s about safety and accountability.”

The forum shifted to a more personal level as attendees broke into small groups, each table bringing together two SFDA’s office representatives with multiple prisoners. They posed questions designed to illuminate causative factors to crime, possible preventive or intervening factors, and residents’ rehabilitative efforts as well as what they feel is missing from the reform and reentry processes.

The questions began with, “As a woman... what is the greatest challenge you have had to overcome while being in prison?”



Common themes in the women’s histories included a lack of support with motherhood or addiction, and a lack of knowledge around healthy versus unhealthy relationships.

Residents delved into trauma or an absence of help from authorities or social services which ultimately led them to criminal behavior. Many shared ideas for criminal justice improvements, and for additional programs which would help with healing and reentry preparation.

When sexual abuse prosecutor Leigh Fraizier asked about internal challenges which may be hard to see from outside, women at her table mentioned a need for cultural change around internal abuse and its reporting and prevention, as well as a need for safer work practices.

Attendees placed great value on education and expressed gratitude for relatively recent higher education opportunities, including the Bachelor’s program with Fresno State University. Several agreed with resident Joanna Gomez’s request, “We need help with getting up with the times. Some of us don’t know how to get connected and function with technology.”

Others expressed a desire for surrogate dialogue (opportunities to talk with victims of crimes similar to our own), as well as incredulity that the recent Town Hall on menopause was a first occurrence.

Fraizier commented that prosecutors don’t have contact with people who’ve committed crimes.

“This is an opportunity to learn something I’m typically blocked off from,” she said. “I’m interested in, can this be a place for healing and rehabilitation? I’m so grateful for your being open with us.”

“We would like to do this twice a year, to continue this progress,” said Jenkins.

# A Chaplain's Calling



Photo courtesy of Melissa Untalon-Espino

## How Sister Melissa Untalon-Espino shepherds her flock

By **Nora Igova**  
& **Joanna Gomez**

Melissa Untalon-Espino, aka Sister Melissa, is the Protestant chaplain at Central California Women's Facility (CCWF), who has dedicated more than 30 years to ministry.

People at CCWF know Untalon-Espino as a woman passionate about God. She also looks like a doll that belongs on top of a wedding cake. A petite fashionista that can create a whole outfit based on a pair of earrings she likes.

Originally from Monterey County, Untalon-Espino was brought up in a Christian home by Bea and Pastor Pete Untalon, who served as chaplain at Valley State Prison for Women for 13 years.

When she was pregnant with Untalon-Espino, Bea was baptized in the river Arroyo Seco. Right then, Pastor Pete knew his daughter was a child of God. She had a sensitive nature, kind-heartedness, and a love for people, even as a kid, he said.

Untalon-Espino's parents have been the biggest influence in her life. She believed her dad when he said, "being a Christian doesn't necessarily mean that one truly has a relationship with God. Just like being born in a garage doesn't make you a car."

"They taught me how to love God, love people, and not quit when it's hard," Untalon-Espino said. "These lessons are with me every single day." They sowed a seed in her that flourished and now, after a whole lot of running and struggles, she is exactly where she is supposed to be.

The family relocated to the Central Valley in 1991, when she was 19. Around that same time, having the gift of singing, she began a music career, traveling performing Christian R&B and continued for years after that. At age 21, Untalon-Espino signed to a record label. Her music was uploaded to CDbaby (a digital distribution company that puts artists' music on every music streaming website available).

Untalon-Espino was floored when she received the reports on how many times her music has been downloaded internationally. DJs became Facebook friends of hers and she became part of people's playlists.

"It is really cool to see a playlist that looks like this: Ashante, Sade, Melissa Untalon, Robin Thicke, Usher," Untalon-Espino said.

However, deep down in heart she felt it wasn't her true passion.

**“**I never thought my daughter would be a state chaplain and she would be literally sitting in my chair,” Pastor Pete said. But “we got the same calling... She relates to the women. She doesn't work for CDCR. She works for God.”

Later on, as an adult, Untalon-Espino went through some hardships in life. Pastor Pete watched her being emotionally in pain, alone with her kids, the loss of her home, her economic status changed. From that moment on she began to equip herself spiritually with the word of God.

But she didn't stop there. She took the phrase “Equip Yourself” and put it on her coffee cup, t-shirt, notepads, book bags, and her mouse pad as a daily reminder of her unshakable faith in God. She preaches that you are equipped with the word of God, when the hard times come and they always do, you will always have a foundation that sustains you.

One verse that always comes to her mind is Matthew 6:33 “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and everything else will be added unto you.” Today, Matthew 6:33 is her license plate and a permanent registration with the Department of God.

“I watched her pray through her hopelessness as she remained faithful to God,” Pastor Pete said. “As a father and counselor, I can only do so much. The rest was God. He gave her favor as she continued to have trust in Him and [He] placed her in the largest women's prison.”

Untalon-Espino has worked in CCWF for more than 10 years. She started as an office technician in the Medical Scheduling Department,

then she moved to the Employee Relations/Labor Relations office. She stayed there for two years and then promoted to become executive assistant to the warden. She worked among the warden's management team for six years.

“Working in the warden's office was intimidating,” Untalon-Espino said. “However, I was surrounded with great people, and I learned a lot about, not only CCWF, but the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation [CDCR] in general.”

Subsequently, Untalon-Espino was approached by Community Resources Manager Courtney Waybright with the information that the Protestant chaplain position was opening soon and suggested she might be a good fit for the position. Waybright remembered thinking “here was this small person with a big voice, spiritually,” and that Untalon-Espino would be a great fit for the job. She took Waybright's suggestion and submitted a letter of interest, because she always wanted to walk in her dad's footsteps.

The rest was history. Untalon-Espino became the new CCWF Protestant chaplain, in 2023.

“What Waybright didn't know,” Untalon-Espino said, “being a chaplain had been a dream of mine for over 20 years.” Untalon-Espino often sang at her dad's services at Valley State Prison for Women, which had



Photo courtesy of Melissa Untalon-Espino

CCWF's Community Resource Manager Courtney Waybright remembered thinking "here was this small person with a big voice, spiritually," and Untalon-Espino would be a great fit for the job.



Photo courtesy of Melissa Untalon-Espino

always been a fulfilling experience. After many years, life lessons, heartaches and tribulations, the Lord gave her the reassurance of her readiness to step into her role.

The position both surprised Pastor Pete, and didn't.

"I never thought my daughter would be a state chaplain and she would be literally sitting in my chair," he said. But "we got the same calling ... She relates to the women. She doesn't work for CDCR. She works for God."

Her role as a chaplain is often misunderstood. Some people think chaplains just pray with people. That is part of it, but it is also walking through grief, celebrating victories, connecting people to resources, and sometimes just sitting in silence with someone so they know they are not alone.

Untalon-Espino described the community of CCWF as courageous, full of perseverance, resilience and heart. When hard days come,

and they always do, she encourages herself with prayer, remembering why she is here and of course a good cup of coffee or two. One of the many things Untalon-Espino has learned from the incarcerated that has changed her as a person is resilience: the ability to get back up after life has knocked you down.

Untalon-Espino will never forget what it's like listening to a gym full of incarcerated people worshipping at the top of their lungs.

"It's electric and the atmosphere is indescribable," she said. "When outside volunteers come to CCWF and witness this, they all leave saying the same thing, 'WOW, the worship here is better than some churches out in the free world.' God pouring out His spirit like He said He would. That is a thing one doesn't forget."

CCWF resident Melissa Salazar has worked for the chapel and Untalon-Espino for a little over two years and she loves her job as she serves her Lord and community.

"Working with Sister Melissa has been a blessing and a humbling experience," Salazar said. "She sees each and every one of us not by our cases, flaws, or where we came from, but as beautiful children of God."

Salazar paused, took a deep breath and said, "That's very hard to do in a place like this, especially when we don't see ourselves like that."

Salazar talked about Untalon-Espino's spirit bringing people together and the way she makes her place a sanctuary for all. "She's not about filling the seats in the chapel, but about planting the seeds in their minds," Salazar said.

The few other things Untalon-Espino would tell her younger self are: "Don't sit in the sun so much, eat healthy, take care of your singing voice, and stay away from thugs."

The advice from Untalon-Espino to someone that feels stuck is "Your story isn't over. You might be in a chapter you don't like, but God is still writing, and He is good at plot twists," Untalon-Espino said.

The reason behind what she does every day is because, "Every soul matters. Period."

Illustration courtesy of Melissa Untalon-Espino



*That the servant of the Lord will be thoroughly equipped for every good work*

## By Sagal Sadiq

Prisons are noisy places. Thanks to Hollywood and serial television cop shows, the world at large knows what prisons sound like: the yelling, clanging of cell doors, banging, people arguing, loudspeaker announcements, and correctional officers (COs) shouting orders. There is no dearth of the above-mentioned din.

"Q" is for quiet.

Webster's Dictionary defines quiet as "the condition of being calm and peaceful; not easily excited or upset."

There are no quiet places in prison. I remember vividly that during my first year, I was overwrought emotionally and in search of some peace and quiet. I was on the Main Yard, and so I wandered off past the track, found a patch of tall grass, and sat down. Those of you incarcerated and reading this already know what happened next.

One minute I was sitting there with my eyes closed, and the next I was accosted by a CO. He was kind about it, after he realized what I was "not doing," but he made sure to "educate" me on areas that were out of bounds. So off I went, "educated" but still overwrought, and my quiet interrupted. Years later, I would learn the skill of finding quiet inside myself and being less affected by the external acoustic madness I was surrounded by. But that is a talent, a learned talent that required cultivating.

In order to find the quiet inside, one must move their focus inward and be quiet and still. You cannot find the quiet without actually being quiet. So, stop talking just to talk and learn to relish the silence that each moment affords you.

Some stillness is built in because being incarcerated forces you to be still. The loss of freedom

# Felon's Alphabet



Illustration by Canva AI

compels a freshly incarcerated individual to visualize montages of moments missed: a sister's wedding, a parent's death, the birth of a child, the promotion never gotten, the dream car never purchased, the dream girl or guy never met, or even worse, met, married, and left behind. It is sad. It is real. And it is something we all have in common. Because although our life montages may be different, they are all eerily similar in that they depict dreams deferred.

There is shame in that montage. There is pain in that quiet. But rehabilitation happens in those moments when past losses and the hope for a better future collide. In the lives of those whose past was shaped by trauma, instability, addiction, and gang life, quiet is rare, and chaos is normal.

Quiet can cause a person to face that which can no longer be avoided. The early days of incarceration can be some of the hardest ever in life, not because of the loss of freedom but because one is dropped into stillness, into the quiet. For some, this silence is overwhelming.

Close your eyes and imagine those cold, lonely, uncertain nights when all you have are your own errant, guilt-ridden thoughts and raw regret to keep you company. All the woulda, coulda, shouldas.

However, for those brave enough to do the work, salvation can be found in that quiet. You can find your lost authentic self in that quiet. You just have to be courageous enough to be still, process, accept responsibility, and make the right amends to the right person at the right time.

Quiet can be found in the synergy of self-help groups when the processing gets deep. Quiet can be found when a lifer "connects the dots" of their life crime and begins to address their causative factors. Quiet is attained when, instead of staying busy, staying high, staying angry, staying numb, one chooses to be mindfully present in the moment.

The first crack in the façade of denial happens when you can be present in the moment, be still and sit face to face with your childhood trauma, the harm you have caused, the harm done to you, accept the consequences of your poor decisions, acknowledge that while some dreams are no longer attainable, you can and you will dream again, and that those new dreams are well within reach.

## FEATURES

# April Fools' Day

## CCWF's residents carry on the joke-telling tradition

By Mallissa James

Have you ever wondered where the traditional joke-telling day of the year came from? There are many theories dating back to the 16th century that paved the way for what we know today as April Fools' Day.

According to the History Channel, the most popular theory of April Fools' Day comes from the French calendar change in 1582, when the new year was changed from April 1 to Jan. 1. Those who neglected the change were made fun of, "sent on fool's errands," and were labeled "April Fools."

Another theory comes from a Flemish poem dating back to 1561 that rhymes about a servant being sent on fool's errands: "The servant ran hither and tither...carrying his messages that served no purpose...The nobleman called him a fool, and the day was marked in a prankish rule."

Throughout Central California Women's Facility (CCWF), April Fools' Day is both embraced and loathed by the population. People get a kick out of seeing others fooled, but who enjoys being duped?

Over 400 years later, CCWF residents are still carrying on the joke-telling tradition. The population had mixed opinions about April Fools' Day, but two things they had in common were their mischievous smiles and animated responses.

"April Fools' Day is prank day...I can't wait," said resident Jasmine Jackson.

She said she would prank anybody. One year, Jackson put peanut butter on a toilet seat that her entire room shares. On an early April Fools' morning, one of her roommates failed to turn the bathroom

light on before using the commode and sat in the peanut butter.

"I have no limit," Jackson admitted. "It's probably not funny for the other person, but it gives people something to look forward to."

People like to laugh, that is for sure. But not all jokes are going to be funny for everyone. Others may use different types of humor in order to cope with difficult situations.

New resident Amy Black played a joke on the date of her sentencing. Black told everyone she was going home after court. She said everyone was crying when suddenly she

yelled, "April Fools!"

Black was not being released but instead had received a 15-to-life sentence. She said that most people responded with laughter, while others got mad. Although this kind of joke can be a huge let-down to others, she said it was not meant to do harm.

Finding a balance between harmless jokes and jokes that can cause problems for others is crucial for some residents.

Long-term resident Michelle Ozaeta said, "I love April Fools', but it depends on the prank."

Ozaeta is still disturbed by an April Fools' phone call she received about someone getting into a car accident. She said that some people go too far, though she quickly recovered, saying, "But April Fools' is a 'holiday,' so it's a free-for-all."

A tradition that has been ongoing for centuries is probably not going anywhere anytime soon.

April Fools' Day can be positive or negative; fun or not. But one thing remains true: "It's a day you can prank people," resident Sandra Dillard said, laughing. "Just don't take anything too seriously."



Art by Nora Igova

## CCWF Launches Running Club

By Sagal Sadiq

Members of Central California Women's Facility's (CCWF) newly established PACE running club took their first laps around the track on March 13. Approximately 20 incarcerated people showed up to attend the first two-hour group session.

CCWF Recreational Coach G. Martinelli is the club supervisor. Amy Cameron and Leo Pershall, coaches from San Quentin Rehabilitation Center's Thousand Mile Club, joined the runners for their first day and plan to attend group sessions regularly going forward.

Club members choose the name PACE because they see it as a metaphor for life. Just like running, life requires that we pace ourselves. We must know when to slow down, when to pick up the pace, when to push through, and when to stop.

The biggest reason for why people

### PACE yourself



Illustration by Canva AI

wanted to participate was mental health. They shared how running helped them to cope with anger, anxiety, and stress. "I'm excited to be out here for my mental health, which is so important. I'm glad to have the accountability I need

to keep me going," said runner Hannah Habibi.

Participants were delighted when they were joined on the track by Lieutenant Monique Williams and CCIII F. Singleton.

Runner Brittany Fields shared, "I enjoy working out...it gives me a peace of mind. I enjoy feeling this peace. I'm going to come every time I get a ducat."

Pershall ended the day's session by telling the participants to journal about how they felt after running for 30 minutes, and to look back on it in October.

"It is really inspiring to validate progress," he said. "You'll be surprised how far you've come."

The running club plans to meet once a month on a Friday 10-12. Runners are invited to run the Main Yard track on other Fridays. On off-days, members are encouraged to train independently through the week, following a written workout plan.

For anyone interested in participating, submit a form 22 to Coach Martinelli.