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Bill Cirone op ed column

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A new direction

By Bill Cirone, Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools

22-year-old Yaskin Solano surveys the group assembled before him at the Los Prietos Boys Camp, a 17-acre facility in the Los Padres National Forrest that provides work and vocational training, counseling, and promotes volunteer and community service to young males aged 13 to 18 who have had trouble with the law.

“Yesterday, my life was headed in one direction,” Yaskin says, quoting author David Mitchell. “Today, it is headed in another. Yesterday, I believe I would never have done what I did today. Each point of intersection, each encounter, suggest a new potential direction.”

Yaskin pauses to allow the prospect of a new direction to sink in. He knows this audience rather well. He used to be one of them.

His parents divorced when he was young, and his mother worked multiple jobs to provide for her family, which often meant Yaskin was left to fend for himself. He also had plenty of opportunities to get into trouble.

“I was 13 when I got my first misdemeanor charge for petty theft,” Yaskin says. “I also got into a lot of fights.” He found himself drawing the attention of both law enforcement and school administrators, for all the wrong reasons.

More trouble followed. As a 14-year old high school freshman, he was charged with grand theft after a shoplifting spree in Santa Maria with several accomplices. One result of that action was a six-month commitment to Los Prietos Boys Camp.

Barely three months in, he and three other boys escaped from the camp while walking back to their dorm rooms after dinner one evening. The escapees would eventually split up, but Yaskin remained at large for nearly three weeks.

After being taken back into custody, Yaskin was forced to confront the effects his behavior had on his mother and older siblings. “My brother and sister had their acts together,” Yaskin says, “and my mother is the hardest working person I know. I realized I was quickly running out of options. Worse, I was breaking the hearts of those who truly loved and cared about me. I had no choice but to change. Fast.”

Change he did. “When he returned to Camp,” says Mark Leufkens, the former director of Santa Barbara County Education Office’s Juvenile Court and Community Schools, “he was on his way to becoming a different person.”

With a disciplined commitment to success, he eventually graduated from Dos Pueblos High School in 2012. Yaskin, whose quiet demeanor belies his intensity and drive, is now one class short of earning his AA degree, and has his sights set on becoming an EMT, all while continuing to hone his skills as a martial artist. He was also recently honored with an Every Student Succeeding Award, presented by the Association of California School Administrators.

But more important than the accolades is the opportunity to reach those who are making the same kinds of poor decisions he once did. It is a platform he relishes, in his capacity as communications coordinator for Freedom4Youth, whose mission is “to empower youth and build community in the juvenile justice system.”

“I made a lot of bad choices,” Yaskin readily admits. “But I can also say that when I began to make good decisions consistently, I turned my life around. I’m excited for my future, and I’m thankful for the coaches, teachers, and administrators who never gave up on me.”

At every opportunity, Yaskin now shares his story with students. “The message I want to communicate to the students is that they have the power within them to make the right choices and turn their lives around.”

His story and message is one of hope and change. It is also one that captures the power in the saying, “Never give up on anyone. Miracles happen every day.” We join Yaskin in thanking his family, educators, and law enforcement officials who never gave up on him, inspiring a vision and path to a productive life.

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