

# THE PATH FORWARD

## Project Rebound Student Taps into Experience, Gifts to Help Others

By Melanie Johnson

Growing up in East Los Angeles, **Mario Quintana** stood out when he wanted to blend in.

His caramel skin – the product of a Mexican mother and an African American father – brought him unwanted attention from some neighborhood bullies.

“There were no blacks in East LA,” he says. “I was always fighting.”

When he was 12, he was walking down the street when a few youths started picking on him. Some teens jumped on them in his defense and gave Quintana some advice.

“They said, ‘If anyone approaches you, you smash them in the face,’” he says. “I did it one day, and I felt a sense of power. I started hanging out with those guys. And those guys were in gangs.”

His involvement in gangs led to stints in juvenile and adult correctional facilities for charges ranging from burglary to committing three shootings in one night, one in which a man was maimed. He received a third strike sentence of 25 years to life for injuring someone after accidentally firing a shotgun.

“I was full of rage,” Quintana says of those years.

It took a period of soul searching, coupled with a newly discovered love for books and a daughter he wanted to turn his life around for, that helped Quintana make a change.

Now, the 49-year-old junior is studying psychology with a career plan to work with youth in the juvenile justice system and serving as the student liaison for **Project Rebound**, a program on campus that provides academic advising, financial assistance and a workspace for formerly incarcerated students.

The late Professor John Irwin, who taught sociology and criminology for 27 years, founded the program at San Francisco State in 1967. Irwin had served a five-year sentence for armed robbery in Soledad Prison in the 1950s before earning a bachelor’s from UCLA and a doctorate from UC Berkeley.

Project Rebound expanded in 2016 into a consortium of nine CSU campus programs, including the

one at Cal Poly Pomona. Since that expansion, students system-wide have an overall GPA of 3.0 and a zero percent recidivism rate, according to the program website. About 87 percent of Project Rebound graduates have secured full-time employment or admission to graduate school programs.

It was Project Rebound that brought Quintana to Cal Poly Pomona.

While in prison, Quintana earned two associate degrees from Coastline Community College in Fountain Valley – one in math and science and another in behavioral studies. He also discovered an interest in law. Working in the prison law library, he helped other inmates with their legal paperwork and also assisted inmates who were physically and developmentally disabled and became a disability advocate.

Quintana had an uncle who was a teacher and activist in the Chicano Movement of the 1960s whose influence he would feel when he began to pursue higher education. However, growing up, Quintana struggled in school and didn’t think he was college material.

“I thought I was stupid,” he says. “It wasn’t until I started reading books and studying physics and quantum mechanics and psychology journals that I realized I wasn’t. It wasn’t until I started doing legal stuff that I understood my gift.”

Quintana tapped into his legal prowess to challenge his sentence, proving that the district attorney in his case promised something impossible to grant in his plea agreement. That shaved five years off of his sentence and cleared the path for possible parole, he says.

While doing research on college programs, he learned about Project Rebound. He wrote to a few CSU campuses, and Political Science Professor **Renford Reese**, who oversees Project Rebound at Cal Poly Pomona, wrote back.

“His story was very inspirational,” Reese says. “His letter was very well written. You could clearly



Psychology student Mario Quintana is a student liaison for Project Rebound, which helps formerly incarcerated students on campus.

not just see, but feel, his desire to transform his life. There was a sense of urgency in his words that jumped off the page.”

After getting to know Quintana, Reese wrote a letter to the parole board on Quintana’s behalf. Quintana says the letter tipped the scale, and he was released Dec. 12, 2017, after serving 20 years.

About a month later, Quintana sat in on one of Reese’s criminal justice classes through the College of Extended University’s open university program, debating the system with his new classmates. Quintana read all of the assigned readings and books, turned his assignments in on time and earned the highest grade of the 44 students in the class, Reese says. He was granted admission to Cal Poly Pomona in fall 2018.

“His expertise, his comments, the content that he was able to speak about was even more memorable and enlightening than anything that I could have given the students as a professor,” Reese says. “When you bring people into the classroom who have real, lived experiences, they have a breadth and depth other students don’t have, and you get a real learning experience.”

It was a struggle for Quintana initially, trying to balance a full load of classes while working off campus 30-plus hours a week. So Reese hired him as a student liaison, often serving as the first point of contact for prospective students who want to become part of the program. The on-campus job has helped him balance school and work, and Quintana also has the opportunity to attend conferences and give presentations.

It can be alienating coming to a university campus as a formerly incarcerated, older student with limited exposure to technology, Quintana says. Project Rebound has served as a lifeline, providing him with support from others who have similar experiences and helping him adjust to campus life.

“Transitioning to a college setting is very difficult,” he says. “People out here can’t understand what it is like to face the types of things I have faced. With Project Rebound, you have this support system. To overcome that adversity or whatever you’re going through, a support system is important.”

Quintana also will serve as a student mentor for a new program Reese is spearheading – one that will enlist 12 Project Rebound participants from six CSU campuses to mentor youth in juvenile correctional facilities who are interested in pursuing college degrees once released.

Quintana initially enrolled at CPP as an electronics engineering technology student, but recently switched to psychology, in large part, to enable him to work with youth.

“I am excited because I actually have training in that,” he says about working with juveniles. “While in prison, I was a mentor for the Youth Offender Program. You have to connect them to programs they can relate to. We are relatable. A lot of them won’t talk to people in a suit.”