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After a Youth of Breaking the Law, He Finds His Calling: Making the Law

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Francis "Frankie" Guzman learned at an early age what it means to be discriminated against. In juvenile hall for armed robbery at age 15, Guzman watched as two young white women who robbed a pizza joint at gunpoint got off with probation after two weeks in jail. With a nearly identical crime, Guzman, a Mexican American, waited eight months to hear his sentence - and got 15 years in prison.

Guzman said he "mostly took the wrong track" while growing up in Oxnard, a city with a large number of Mexican immigrants in the heavily Republican county of Ventura. Raised in a house with four women, Guzman quickly turned to the streets to find male role models. By age 10, he would do anything for his brothers in the local gang. A few years later, he failed out of high school with a 0.8 grade point average and landed in the California Youth Authority for robbing a liquor store with a handgun and a stolen car.

Fast forward to 2010, and a 30-year-old Guzman has just finished his first year at UCLA School of Law, is set to co-chair the school's La Raza Law Students Association next year, and is about to begin a summer internship with Public Counsel in Los Angeles.



Francis "Frankie" Guzman went from armed robbery to three stints in prison before turning his life around and going to law school.

It took three stints in youth prison - four years of his original sentence plus two additional years for parole violations - before he shook his criminal way of life. The experience showed him "the whole system was corrupt and racist and unfair," he said, which fueled his desire to one day change the system.

Now, he aspires to run his own nonprofit focused on youth development, mental health care, juvenile justice and immigration law. He envisions a small operation that would get local students involved in conducting research on issues facing the community and would bring class action lawsuits if policy recommendations were not taken seriously.

In the short term, Guzman plans to work for Public Counsel and continue speaking to students at underperforming California schools, something he's done for years. He said he speaks to hundreds of kids a month, telling them his story and encouraging them to pick a good path.

"This is a group of children that will die if we don't help them," Guzman said. "If you don't give them anything to look up to, they're not going to live up to anything."

Between his second and third stretch in prison, Guzman stopped working dead-end jobs and enrolled in Oxnard College, where he says he had a rebirth. He got involved with student government and ran for public relations officer to become more articulate. Although he was originally working toward a sociology degree, counselors noticed Guzman's strong writing style and encouraged him to pursue a degree in English.

He remembers questioning their suggestion, asking, "Why English? Isn't that white studies?" But he liked writing, a skill he developed from penning letters to friends while in jail, and though he hadn't read a book cover-to-cover until he was 19 (his first was Dean Koontz's "Intensity"), he went for it.

He transferred to UC Berkeley, graduating two years later with a 3.5 GPA, and began working at the National Center for Youth Law in Oakland.

John O'Toole, director of the center, said Guzman is one of the most talented assistants he's had in his 30 years there and came recommended from the Greenlining Institute, a public policy research and advocacy group where Guzman worked during college.

"When he believes in something he'll run through a brick wall and do whatever it takes," O'Toole said. "He's fired up about what he's trying to accomplish and very dedicated."

For 10 weeks this summer, he'll work with Public Counsel's Immigrants' Rights Project under the watch of senior staff attorney Gina Amato. The two met at Berkeley, when Amato worked in the admissions office there, and she's served as his mentor ever since.

"I think the law is a great field for him, because he's already been exposed to the criminal justice system in his personal life," Amato said. "It's a great way for him to harness his passion and anger into something positive."

Guzman said he knows he grew up angry. When he was 5, his brother was convicted of murder and received a life sentence in prison. He watched as police constantly hassled with the Mexican-Americans in his neighborhood, stopping them for no reason if they suspected gang involvement. His single mother worked tirelessly cleaning the homes of wealthy Malibu residents while raising Guzman and his siblings, but could never quite get ahead.

Its role models like his mother, who never complains about the hard work she has to do, that Guzman thinks about when law school gets tough.

"I've had a hard time in law school, but never such that I felt like quitting or question why I'm there," Guzman said. "I think: My problems are good problems."

"My issue is not an issue, it's a blessing."

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