Former inmates get back on track

Friends Outside program helps ex-convicts with community reentry

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SANTA CRUZ — David Perez’s struggle with drug addiction has sullied his life since he was a teenage runaway in Watsonville.

Time in Santa Cruz County Juvenile Hall gave way to a felony grand theft conviction at age 18 in 2001. A few years later, a state prison sentence came from convictions for receiving stolen property and methamphetamine possession. Perez bounced in and out of Santa Cruz County Jail in his 20s for drug charges and probation violations, with seemingly no end in sight.

He got a night job at a warehouse in Watsonville, but he said he used that as an excuse to use meth again. Again he got in trouble.

Last year, his mother visited him in County Jail and talked to him by phone as they looked at each other, separated by heavy glass. She recently suffered a mild stroke, but she was still trying to help Perez, the youngest of her eight children. Perez said it was a turning point in his life.

“We’re talking on the phone and we’re both crying,” Perez recalled Thursday. “I felt the pain she felt. I thought, I didn’t want my mother to go through this.”

Now 32, Perez was in Rountree Detention Center near La Selva Beach in late 2013 when he found a Friends Outside program called Thinking For a Change. Friends Outside is a Santa Cruz-based non-profit group that helps inmates re-enter society with various forms of support, and Thinking for a Change is its three-month behavior class. It goes over social skills and problem-solving techniques to help inmates kick bad habits and lead productive lives.

“He excelled greatly in that class, and we’ve worked with him to get his life back on track,” said Savanna Sandusky, in-custody coordinator of Friends Outside.

Friday at 6 p.m., Perez and 17 other former inmates will be honored at the 8th Semi-Annual Friends Outside Recognition Ceremony at Twin Lakes Christian Church in Aptos. All the Friends Outside clients are in different phases of “re-entry” into society, Sandusky said, and the ceremony recognizes them for their efforts to stay out of trouble.

“He definitely deserves this recognition,” Sandusky said of Perez. “A lot of people are really proud of him.”

Perez is not the only Friends Outside client to be successful. About 20 percent of them have returned to trouble with the law from July 2013 to July 2014, compared with a recent county average of about 70 percent.

In recent months, Perez has been living at a sober living environment at Janus of Santa Cruz on Seventh Avenue. He’s taking classes at Cabrillo College in human services on a path to become an alcohol and drug counselor, and he’s looking for restaurant work to help pay the bills.

Long term, Perez said he hopes to become an immigration attorney.

This week, he thanked many of the people who have helped him, including Sandusky and Santa Cruz County sheriff’s Sgt. Steve Gagnon at Rountree.

Gagnon saw him boomeranging in and out of jail, and he encouraged Perez to participate in Thinking For a Change.

Friends Outside staff have helped him enroll at Cabrillo and fill out financial aid forms, for instance, and he attends weekly therapy sessions with the program.

They’ve done so much for me, I’m so grateful,” Perez said.

“It’s a struggle, but it’s a struggle all within myself. The struggle was not asking for help. You’ve got to ask for help,” he said.

“I feel like when you don’t ask for help, all the fear, all the anxiety comes in and you just go back to your addiction. If you ask for help, the help’s out there.”