

My Second Life

By Rudy M.

On Christmas Eve a few years ago, I died. I overdosed on heroin and alcohol, and I wouldn't be here today if my friend hadn't known CPR. He saved my life that night. But my life wasn't really saved until a few months later when I was arrested for possession and got treatment instead of jail. Thanks to the voters that passed Proposition 36, I am recovering from a lifelong drug problem—and am getting better every day.

Because of Prop 36, I will spend this Christmas alive, clean and sober, and with my mom and little sister. I will go to a Christmas party on the La Jolla reservation with my tribe. And I will go to a party at Casa Rafael in Vista, where I got help and where I help other guys now. All of this is a miracle that I thank God for.

Before I went to Casa, all I knew was drinking, using and life on the streets. Jail and prison were a part of that life. When I got busted, I thought of it as a vacation from the streets. I would go in, get healthy, come out and hit the streets again. I didn't have any trouble getting drugs inside. And when I was released with the standard \$200, I would buy \$20 tennis shoes and \$180 worth of dope. I had been doing that for years.

That cycle stopped when I got Prop 36 and got treatment for the first time in my life. I was assigned to one year of inpatient treatment, but I knew it wouldn't be enough. I had been drinking for three decades, using heroin for over twenty years and getting in trouble at least as long. I needed to learn everything about this other way of life. I extended my stay at Casa by three months—twice. With aftercare, I was in there for 23 months all together. I've been sober now for three years and 10 months.

I'm proof that Prop 36 works. And so are a lot of other guys at Casa, and ladies over at North County Serenity House in Escondido. I worry that politicians in Sacramento, like Senator Ducheny, really don't get it. They think they can punish people like me into wanting to change. They need to understand that it doesn't work that way. If it did, I would have stopped using twenty years ago. Years of prison didn't teach me anything but how to keep living the life I was living.

If Senator Ducheny got her way, people like me in Prop 36 would have to worry about going to jail for a missed appointment or another small screw-up. Nobody is going to sign up for a program like that. (I mean, has Senator Ducheny ever been late for an appointment? Did she get jail time for it?) The point is that jail time won't make Prop 36 better, it will ruin Prop 36 because people like me, who need treatment, won't ask for it.

What Prop 36 really needs is more money—and the Governor should put it in his draft budget in January. More people need to be able to ask for help and get the kind of help they need. I needed two years at Casa. Other guys might need longer. We shouldn't give up on people who want to keep learning and trying. That's what we've been doing, and that's how we've been filling up the prisons. Prop 36 is about trying something different. If politicians cut money for Prop 36 treatment, the Governor might as well start building more prisons now.

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