

# RECONCILING LIFE AFTER PRISON

Exodus Project mentors walk with inmates  
as they return to society

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE GERMAN

**L**ISTENING, HOPING, PRAYING AS JESUS' EDICT RINGS WITHIN – “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:40) – mentors with Exodus Project Sacramento stand convicted. Convicted not of a crime, but of a mission to recognize and love the human dignity that resides in every soul: the marginalized, the broken, the anxious and the imprisoned.

They stand for what they know and feel in their hearts, mercifully working to accompany incarcerated men and women beyond the heavy jail doors of Sacramento County's Rio Cosumnes Correctional Center (RCCC) in Elk Grove.

“I can't offer money, or a house or material stuff,” says mentor Troy Ellerman, “but I can offer time.” Troy trained at the onset of the pilot program in 2019 along with fellow mentor Fay Landry. Both commit five to eight volunteer hours a month to simply “be” with their methodically-matched, soon-to-be-released inmate just before and for about six months after prison release.

Directed by the Sacramento Diocesan Council of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and supported by the Diocese of Sacramento, Exodus Project

advocates for being present for individuals ready to reintegrate and pursue a new beginning. Accordingly, mentors hold a genuine desire to help reconcile life after prison.

“Our support of these people is so important, not only for us but for the salvation of everyone,” Fay insists firmly. “God expects this of us,” she says beautifully, intimating how Jesus' command to love one another is a command, not a perfunctory byproduct of volunteerism. “He doesn't ask much,” she adds, affirming how being “available for somebody is God's plan.”

“We are called to do more than just consume,” Troy urges, stressing that bonds among all people – the marginalized, the imprisoned – deserve attention and compassion. “We are called to be in relationship and it takes work,” he concedes, reframing

■ Troy Ellerman, a mentor for the Exodus Project, walks along the Tower Bridge in downtown Sacramento.



■ Troy Ellerman

top-of-mind perceptions on what “relationship” means. “It goes beyond family and friends,” he reasons, suggesting it even goes beyond what is easy or comfortable to “include our least brothers.”

## SUPPORTING THE NEED TO BELONG

“I do believe that everybody needs to belong in some way and this is one way that the Lord is giving me to share my faith,” Fay explains, feeling that connections made in these mentor-mentee relationships foster a sense of belonging. It leads them to feel better about themselves and instills “a tendency to want to do better,” she says.

Easing toward retirement from her West Sacramento tax business, Fay also spends a good



■ Fay Landry, a mentor for the Exodus Project, stands outside the fence surrounding Sacramento County’s Rio Cosumnes Correctional Center in Elk Grove.

amount of time volunteering with the prison ministry of Our Lady of Grace Parish, which serves prisoners at the Yolo County Jail in Woodland. She enjoys it but describes Exodus Project as “a little bit more time with one person.” This person-to-person experience honestly confronts the challenges newly-released offenders face. Even if a mentee conveys that they are transitioning well, mentors strive to “have an ear to their pain,” Fay explains. Prisoners grapple with depression, anxiety and next steps. Her reverence for this delicate path is clear.

Troy attends St. Ignatius Church in Sacramento and plans to participate in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. A paralegal with advanced degrees in law, and marriage and family counseling, he possesses a seasoned understanding of a mentee’s long road.

His legal background and years of mentoring in other settings give him unique insights in helping Exodus Project participants. And his own

incarceration over a decade ago injects profound empathy into his relationships.

“I can empathize with that person in a dark place,” Troy conveys, referring first to the experience of re-entering society but also with “how they feel when somebody reaches out – I can put myself in their shoes.”

It is that comfort – that place of belonging – that seems to motivate him most in his mentoring, as he recalls how his wife and friends supported and listened to him when he coped with his own depression, shame and guilt.

Yet, Troy’s history exists more as a silent blessing. It gifts him with perspective and his lead-with-listening mantra.

“They don’t want to hear my story or how I’ve been there,” Troy elaborates, acknowledging that there may be a point in the future to build bonds on shared experiences, but not upfront. He says mentees function in “survival mode” and seek to establish trust with their mentor before anything else.

Most recently, Troy mentored Ed for eight months. Sitting and listening to Ed offered the best approach, regardless of

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TROY ELLERMAN

not always having answers or knowing how to heal the pain.

"You're sitting with a grown man," Troy says, describing the poignant and fragile reality of a tough man aware of his wrongs. "He starts to break down and I'm just trying to hold the bucket."

Troy got Ed business cards and reworked his resume to support his re-entry plan to work as an electrician. "His eyes were dancing when he got those cards," Troy recalls, content that Ed found comfort and trust in his mentor-friend and that "he had a place to go, a person to talk to."

Fay maintains great hope for her most recent mentee, Cynthia. Fay candidly asked her if she will want "to lean on" her even though family is nearby. From prior experiences, those who have other people in their lives tend to avoid the mentor after just a short period of time. Cynthia offers emphatic assurance and signals her trust of Fay.

"Most have problems with drugs and alcohol," Fay explains, detailing how addictions "end up taking over your life." While a given period of incarceration may

be a few years, repeated offenses and multiple incarcerations occur often.

"Cynthia has been through the system before but she remains determined and conveys that she's 'at the end.'" Fay heard that determination in her voice as she stated, "I need to finally grow up. I'm tired."

## STEPPING OUT ON SAFE GROUND

Exodus Project works diligently in reviewing applications, conducting interviews and assessing mentors to determine good fits. There are no guarantees in this much-needed work - only faith, hope and love.

Fay's natural faith expression demonstrates that everyone needs to belong. She recounts her conversation with Cynthia about her need to serve the older population upon her release, a truly unselfish way to belong. "I need to pray for you, I will continue to pray for you," Fay committed, promising "I'm not leaving you."

"I need Christ at the center of

all," Troy professes, confident in the "God-shaped heart" in all people, a moral compass yearning for a true north reset.

Inmates with a great desire and enthusiasm to step out on the right foot are matched with mentors according to temperaments, interests and experiences, and "men are always paired with men and women are always paired with women," Fay says. The mentor will communicate regularly, support and guide the mentee with interior needs, relationships and life resources, including housing, support groups, jobs and transportation.

"We don't expect participants to be Catholic, or any denomination really," Fay clarifies, and "we don't ask them if they're affiliated with a religion, or if they believe in God." Instead, as trust builds, mentors may reconnect mentees with faith communities or inspire spiritual awareness. An open, non-judgmental doorway remains key and crossing the threshold means stepping out on safe ground to reconcile life after prison. †

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FAY LANDRY



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About Exodus Project Sacramento at [www.svdpsacramento.org/exodus](http://www.svdpsacramento.org/exodus).



■ Fay Landry walks at the Cosumnes River Preserve near the Rio Cosumnes Correctional Center.