



Straight-A Guide

Begins with Attitude

March 2014 Update, Santa Clara County Juvenile Hall

We at the Michael G. Santos Foundation (MGSF) express our gratitude to Dr. Angela Haick and her colleagues at the Santa Clara County Juvenile Hall. Dr. Haick's team includes educators who are teaching the many students enrolled in the Osborne High School Program as well as professionals who are working in Santa Clara County Probation.

MGSF is pleased and proud to partner with Dr. Haick and her team as they implement our Straight-A Guide Cognitive Skills Development Program. Their decision to use our program demonstrates an enormous amount of courage and trust, as our program is premised on the lessons that guided Michael Santos through 26 years in federal prison. While serving 26 years in prison, Michael studied the patterns of great leaders, many of whom who lived over the past 2,500 years. From them, Michael learned that it is possible to overcome struggle and reach a higher potential by living a values-based, goal-oriented life. Michael committed to living his life in a manner that embodies those patterns. Now our organization works to teach those important lessons to others.

Conveying a message of hope and self-resourcefulness to people in custody can prove

enormously challenging. Our community owes an enormous debt of gratitude to all professionals who devote their careers to teaching such principles to people who live in custody.

At MGSF, our experience convinces us that teachers and probation counselors working with people in custody face numerous difficulties. They must reach an audience that frequently resists, or even rejects positive messages. Rather than preparing for law-abiding, contributing lives upon release, many people in custody cannot see beyond the challenges of their immediate circumstances. The steel doors, heavy locks, and concrete walls of their environment are impenetrable obstacles, blocking their vision and smothering hope. That observation prompted us to create the Straight-A Guide Cognitive Skills Development program. We encourage the team at Santa Clara County Juvenile Hall to consider us as partners in their efforts.

As a pioneering startup organization, MGSF lacks the enormous resources of other groups. Although we do not have all the answers, we are uniquely qualified to offer innovative tools for educators, probation counselors, and law-enforcement officers. They may use those tools in their visionary approach to community safety

and renewal. Indeed, at MGSF we provide resources for professionals to teach people essential patterns for success, such as:

- Rejection of criminal lifestyles,
- Development of critical thinking skills,
- Preparation for fulfilling lives as law-abiding, contributing citizens.

In addition to teaching from the videos, literature, and curriculum that make up our Straight-A Guide Cognitive Skills Development Program, Dr. Haick also contracted with MGSF to bring Michael Santos into the Santa Clara County Juvenile Hall. On four separate occasions (December 11, January 21, February 3, and February 25) Michael led full-day training sessions that included one-on-one interactions with a selected group of students as well as presentations to the student body inside several different housing units and school-wide assemblies. Michael's four full days of hands-on training at the Osborne School provided our team with an enormous amount of information about the impact of our program, all of which helps us learn where we're succeeding and where we need to course-correct in our interactions with some of the students.

We were pleased to find that many of the youth at Osborne School responded positively to the Straight-A Guide Program. Their demonstrated comprehension of the literature, participation in the exercises, and retention of the lessons in the videos revealed a higher level of understanding; they now grasp the power individuals wield to influence their outcomes—whether positive or negative—through the decisions they make. Still, despite the combined efforts of Dr. Haick's team and the MGSF team, we weren't successful in reaching everyone at Osborne School with the same message of hope. What follows are

specific findings that we compiled from feedback given by students and teachers:

Student 1:

Student 1 is 15 years old. It's our understanding that he has been incarcerated 15 times. He is a high school graduate through the independent education program at Osborne and he expressed this vision:

- "You can become someone else and better in life than just being incarcerated."
- A person can study, prepare for employment, and be present for family.

Student 1 also expressed that by changing his thought pattern, he could inspire others to help him find employment. He expressed a willingness to start from the bottom and work hard to advance his life. The next step he would take, he said, would be to find a job and care for his wife and children. He said that he wanted to pursue office work.

Student 1's expression of a change in thinking encourages us. During his 15 previous incarcerations, Student 1 saw himself differently. We're glad that the leaders at Osborne used the Straight-A Guide as a tool to help him understand a better way of thinking and visualize himself as a law-abiding, contributing citizen.

Student 2:

Student 2 expressed gratitude for the one-on-one meetings with Michael. Those meetings have taught Student 2 that, despite a lengthy sentence ahead, he could prepare himself in ways that would lead to his success upon release. He is just 17 years old and nearing completion of the requirements that will lead to his high school diploma.

As a result of engaging in the Straight-A Guide program, Student 2 now aspires for much more. He expresses interest in college and in returning to society with the values and skills that will ensure he never encounters problems with the criminal justice system again.

Student 2's positive attitude may go far in separating him from the negative influences of imprisonment. We're hopeful that he will use the cognitive skills that he learned from the teachers at Osborne High School. He now knows how to reject criminal lifestyles and prepare for success while he serves the remainder of his sentence. His interactions with Michael have helped Student 2 see a better path.

Student 3:

A sophomore student, Student 3 expressed that by participating in the Straight-A Guide Cognitive Skills Development Program he has found advice that helps him through his term. Because Student 3 is listening to people who've transformed their lives while enduring lengthy terms of incarceration, he said that he knows he could do the same thing.

Student 4:

Student 4 is a young woman who said that she found inspiration in the books associated with the Straight-A Guide program. She requested a copy of *Inside: Life Behind Bars in America*, another book authored by Michael that is not a part of the program. Student 4's request tells us that we're making a positive influence. We're helping teachers at Osborne develop an appreciation of learning preferences for some of the students. Not all students identify with the literature in traditional schools. The books that we offer are set in the prison environment, and those who live in custody often connect more

with books they can relate to personally. Our books communicate a message to readers that, despite serving time inside, individuals can transform their life and emerge from confinement as contributing, law-abiding citizens.

Student 5:

Student 5 expressed his enthusiasm for the Straight-A Guide program as follows:

- "Ronnie and Michael were awesome. It is helpful for us to know how it really is. We need copies of the books."

Such thoughts from young people confined in juvenile hall encourage us. We're showing them a different message. The "Ronnie" that Student 5 mentioned was a guest speaker that Michael brought along on the February 25 full-day session. Like Michael, Ronnie served multiple decades in prison. Rather than transforming his life while in custody, Ronnie adjusted to his imprisonment in the traditional way. Negative consequences followed the bad adjustment pattern that Ronnie chose, and he expressed his regret to the audience of students for not adhering to the values-based, goal-oriented adjustment strategy of the Straight-A Guide. Student 5 was one student who appreciated Ronnie's message.

Student 6:

Student 6 is a 17-year old young woman went even further in expressing her appreciation for the program. She faced a sentence that could expose her to decades in prison. After reading the literature associated with the Straight-A Guide, Student 6 took the time to write a heartfelt letter. Dr. Haick has Student 6's letter that showed how the Straight-A Guide program changed her way of thinking. She wrote that prior to participating in the Straight-A Guide, she expected "to

continue doing bad” while in prison. She had been confined inside of the juvenile hall numerous times before and she said that she hadn’t ever thought about changing her life. Since participating in the Straight-A Guide Program, however, Student 6 said that she has changed her way of thinking. Now she knows that she can educate herself and work toward becoming a better person. The Straight-A Guide taught Student 6 that despite the prospect of decades in prison, she could live as a role model for her daughter.

These types of statements encourage us. We believe that they show we are serving as a resource for the leaders at Santa Clara County Juvenile Hall.

Yet, our challenges to reach everyone continue, as some of the following statements indicate:

Student 7:

Student 7 is a young man who has been influenced by gang members throughout his life. He has been incarcerated inside of the juvenile hall on more than a dozen prior occasions, more than he could count. When asked what he learned from the Straight-A Guide, Student 7 said:

- “There is a different way if you want to take it. The choice is yours. I am aware of the consequences. I’m not planning on getting out. Maybe one day things will change, maybe. Being out of this place would help with being with my family.”

Student 7 said that he was on his way to Philadelphia and he wanted take it day by day. He is 15 years old and needs more credits to graduate. We would’ve liked to succeed on a higher level with Student 7. Our initial assessment is that

Student 7 has not yet internalized the concepts of ‘Visualize, Plan, Execute’ that the Straight-A Guide program teaches. We haven’t helped Student 7 visualize a better life, one that exists for him as a law-abiding citizen. Accordingly, he wasn’t willing to put a plan in place and then accept the responsibility of executing that plan.

Student 8:

Student 8 has been confined in juvenile hall on at least eight prior occasions. He is 17 years old and said that he wasn’t interested in reading any of the Straight-A Guide Program books.

Maggie, an Instructional Aid, observed that Student 8 refused to participate in the Straight-A Guide when he was on lockdown status. Yet on February 25th she watched Student 8 while he participated in a small group lunch with Michael and Ronnie. Maggie observed that Student 8 became engaged when Michael offered “advice on how to present himself in a courtroom.”

During the meeting that Maggie observed, the following interaction took place between Student 8 and Michael:

- **Student 8:** What could you do for me when I got out?
- **Michael:** What would you like for me to do?
- **Student 8:** I’d like for you to get me a job.
- **Michael:** If you show a 100 percent commitment to rejecting the criminal lifestyle, I can help you find a job.
- **Student 8:** But I’m always going to be a gang member.
- **Michael:** I cannot persuade an employer to open opportunities for you unless you’re willing to reject the criminal lifestyle.
- **Student 8:** The employer shouldn’t care if I’m a gang member as long as I do my job.

Evidently, despite the valiant efforts of the teachers at Santa Clara County, our program has not yet had a positive influence on Student 8's life. We will take that into consideration as we create new products and services to assist educators in reaching at-risk populations.

Despite Michael's positive message, it is clear that he cannot reach everyone. Michael empathizes with the feelings of all people in confinement, sharing openly about his own experiences while locked inside those same types of institutional environments for 26 years. He validates that sometimes it seems as if people, including staff, don't care, but he simultaneously asserts that an individual must work to succeed in spite of the pervading negativity. In making such comments, Michael aspires to reach and inspire his audience while at the same time being conscious of not disrespecting the courageous efforts of staff members who work with incarcerated youth and to build safer communities.

Michael's approach succeeds in many cases, but sometimes, in cases like Student 8's, it doesn't. In an effort to address this concern, MGSF has retained other formerly incarcerated individuals with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. When appropriate, we're prepared to include formerly incarcerated Black and Hispanic individuals in the teaching process. These

men will share with the students how they chose different adjustment patterns from Michael while they served time. But in the end, they will express a unified message about how embracing the Straight-A Guide could have brought them a different—better—outcome. Each of those men now lives as a law-abiding, contributing citizen. Yet each of them will also say their lives would have been much better if they had learned and embraced the principles of the Straight-A Guide much sooner.

In closing, we are very grateful to Dr. Angela Haick and her team at the Santa Clara County Juvenile Hall for extending this opportunity to serve educators and law-enforcement professionals, and the in-custody youth. Our aspiration and focus centers on teaching people the values and skills that will lead them to:

- Reject criminal lifestyles
- Develop critical thinking skills
- Prepare for law-abiding, contributing lives

We will continue to develop new products and services that leaders can implement. Please contact Dr. Angela Haick for any questions you may have about the validity of this report.

Sincerely,
The Michael G. Santos Foundation



**For Validation of our work,
Please contact Dr. Angela Haick
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