

E's Journey: From Incarceration to Empowered Mentor

By, Dr. Lisa Simone

E's story is a testament to the transformative power of education and support. His journey from early incarceration to becoming a high school graduate and a paid mentor is inspiring, showing the incredible potential of determination and community support.

In the Fall of 2023, E was referred to The Bridge at ACES, a Youth Justice and Education Program offered by Area Cooperative Educational Services. He entered the program with a heavy heart and a tumultuous past. E had additional pending court cases that threatened to lock him up for an extended period. Despite these daunting challenges, he displayed remarkable resilience and commitment to turning his life around.

E immersed himself in his classes, diligently working on credit recovery and his Capstone project. With the unwavering support of his education team, his mother, probation officers, defense attorney, and school principal, E also began mentoring middle school kids. His progress was notable, and it seemed he was on the right path.

A key figure in E's journey was Ms. Nicola Distasio, who worked alongside him on all his required academic work. She provided the guidance and support he needed to stay on track. Ms. Nicola also played a pivotal role in helping E work with the middle school students, offering wisdom and encouragement to a very socially vulnerable group of kids. Her dedication was instrumental in E's development both academically and as a mentor.

However, just as things were looking up, E was caught in another charge and placed in Bridgeport Detention. With only five weeks left until his high school graduation, his future seemed uncertain. The school principal, Dr. Simone, took a bold step and asked E's defense attorney if there was any way to help release him and allow him to graduate on time. The attorney supported her decision to attend his court date.

In court, the judge swore Dr. Simone in, giving her the opportunity to speak on E's behalf. She passionately detailed E's growth as a student and a civic-minded mentor in the program, emphasizing the imperative of his graduation and the positive trajectory he was on. The judge deliberated for an extended period, carefully considering Dr. Simone's words. In the end, she decided to release E, moved by the principal's heartfelt testimony.

E was released and went on to graduate high school in front of his family, peers, CSSD support team, lawyer, and a joyous group of teachers and support staff. It was a moment of triumph and validation for everyone who had supported him along the way.

Recognizing E's potential and his passion for helping others, Dr. Simone reached out to CSSD and probation to explore the possibility of E serving as a paid mentor in The Bridge Middle School summer session. Her efforts were successful, and E began working as a mentor, providing social-emotional and academic support to the children.

E's new role was not without its challenges, but he embraced it wholeheartedly. He imparted his wisdom and shared his mistakes, encouraging the students to strive for success in their academic

and personal lives. He often confided in Dr. Simone, Ms. Nicola, and Ms. Shannelle (School Social Worker) about how difficult yet rewarding his work with the middle school students was. He expressed a newfound desire to become a professional working with young kids, inspired by the positive impact he was making.

E's journey from incarceration to empowerment stands as a powerful example of what can be achieved with determination, support, and the belief in a better future. His transformation is a beacon of hope for others, demonstrating that it is never too late to change and make a difference.