



UNDERGROUND SCHOLARS NEWS

HAPPY NEW YEAR UNDERGROUND SCHOLARS FAMILY!

San Francisco Chronicle

From solitary confinement to UC Berkeley: a story of redemption



Nanette Asimov

Dec. 23, 2021



IN THE NEWS...

Click title to read

[*From solitary confinement to UC Berkeley: a story of redemption*](#)
SF Chronicle

[*UCSB Program Helps Formerly Incarcerated Students*](#)
Santa Barbara Independent

[*Underground Scholars Expands to Host More Activities & Events for Incarceration-Impacted Students*](#)
UCSD Guardian

[*Underground Scholars: New Grounds for Change*](#)
UCSD Guardian

[*A cup of kindness*](#) UCSC News
(Read article on page 7 of this newsletter)

CALIFORNIA 100 PLATFORM

CALIFORNIA IS A STATE OF INNOVATION.

Where ideas are incubated and scaled that ultimately influence the country—and the world. The California 100 Platform highlights innovation across sectors by lifting up 100 ideas and projects transforming the state for the better.

We're honored to be featured by the California 100 Commission as one of 100 innovative projects transforming California for the better. We're transforming lives, communities, and systems by creating pathways for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated to thrive in and out of the university system. Click [HERE](#) to read the feature.



PROGRAM EXPANSION UPDATES

We ended 2021 with a much bigger team than we started with thanks to a two-year grant from the Andrew Mellon Foundation and a three year grant from Crankstart. In July we welcomed **Daniela Medina**, an Underground Scholar and recent MSW graduate, to the UC Berkeley team as assistant director. Daniela has focused on strengthening our retention efforts including developing new programming for students in recovery and a healing series in partnership with the Basic Needs Center and Freedom Community Clinic. She is also the co-producer and host of On the Tier, a podcast we launched in 2021. You can listen to the podcast [here](#).

In October, Bruin Underground Scholars welcomed **Armando Tellez** to the team as the director of the Bruin Underground Scholars and Collegiate Recovery Program. Armando participated in Underground Scholars as an undergrad at UCLA. He earned his Masters at the University of Texas at Austin and worked as associate director of the UCLA Prison Education Program prior to his new role with Underground Scholars.

UC Irvine Underground Scholars welcomed **Hector Cervantes** to the team as the new program director in November. Hector was a co-founder of the Underground Scholars student organization at UC Irvine as an undergrad and remained deeply involved as a graduate student. He earned his Master of Urban and Regional Planning from UC Irvine.

UC Riverside is also in the process of hiring their first full time director to join the team!



POLICY VICTORY FOR INCARCERATED STUDENTS

SB 416 VICTORY: In 2021 our team of Underground Scholars policy fellows co-sponsored and helped pass SB 416, the Incarcerated Students Bill of Rights authored by Senator Hueso. The bill makes changes to the California Penal Code ensuring the college programs offered to incarcerated students are provided by Community Colleges, the California State University, the University of California, or other regionally accredited non-profit colleges or universities.

Click [HERE](#) to read more. Thank you to our policy fellows, Shani Shay, Alex Diaz, and Kevin McCarthy for all your hard work to advance our policy efforts in 2021.

In 2022 we're working with Senator Hueso's office again on a bill we pitched to address a challenge that many of our recently released students face. The bill would change the penal code to facilitate easier transfer of parole to a different county in California to attend college, a rehabilitative program, or for a job opportunity. We have a team of Underground Scholars policy fellows from five UC campuses who will work with Senator Hueso's office, Root & Rebound, and other community partners to pass this bill in 2022.

UNDERGROUND SCHOLARS HEALING CLINICS

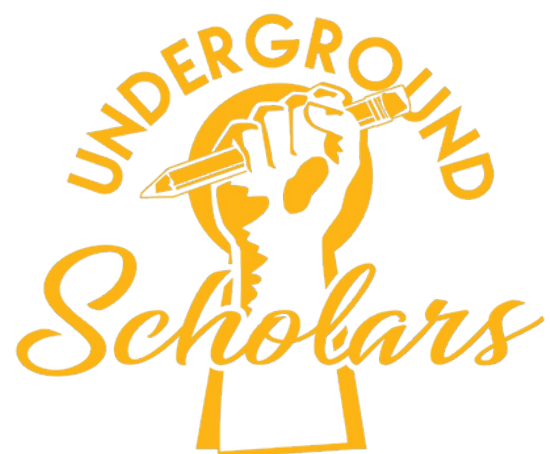
MADE POSSIBLE BY UC BERKELEY BASIC NEEDS CENTER AND FREEDOM COMMUNITY CLINIC



During the Fall semester we partnered with the [Basic Needs Center](#) and [Freedom Community Clinic](#) to bring a healing series to Stiles Hall for Underground Scholars members and staff. Over the course of four clinics, the incredible team from Freedom Community Clinic provided our students with acupuncture, reiki, and massage. For many of our students, it was the first time they experienced those healing modalities. Many participants experienced immediate relief and expressed interest in continuing to receive care. We look forward to working with our partners again to continuing to grow the programs and services we offer for healing, recovery, and addressing trauma.

WEEKLY RECOVERY CIRCLE

As part of growing our retention services for students, in Fall 2021, we launched a weekly recovery circle for our students under the leadership of Assistant Director, Daniela Medina. Underground Scholar leader and alumni, Mark Johnson, has volunteered to facilitate the weekly group. Mark participated in Underground Scholars as an undergrad and graduate student at UC Berkeley. He graduated in 2020 with a Masters of Social Welfare and is currently working with Alameda County as a Social Worker. Daniela is also working with the Collegiate Recovery Program at UC Berkeley to coordinate additional resources and support for our students.



UNDERGROUND SCHOLARS WELLNESS FUND

The Underground Scholars student organization applied for and was awarded nearly \$60,000 from the Chancellor's Advisory Committee on Student Services and Fees (CACSSF) to support the wellness needs of our students. With the funding, we hired three of our members as wellness coordinators to facilitate the new offering during this academic year. Formerly incarcerated students can apply for up to \$1,000 to cover any kind of wellness need.

In the Fall semester we provided over \$25,000 awards directly to 29 students to cover their health and wellness needs. The services that students were able to get reimbursed for include dental care, mental health care, acupuncture, substance abuse treatment, and massage.

Underground Scholars Initiative
WELLNESS FUND

Are you a formerly incarcerated UC Berkeley student struggling with your physical/mental/emotional health?

- Body aches, pain, headaches
- Substance Abuse
- PTSD, Anxiety, Depression
- Unhealed Trauma
- Dental Issues
- Other health challenges

We can provide up to \$1,000 to help you get care!

For more info visit www.tiny.cc/USIWellness2021

CROSS ENROLLMENT FOR INCARCERATED STUDENTS

In Fall 2021, we made history by offering the first UC Berkeley class for incarcerated students. In partnership with Feather River College, West Hills College, the Sociology Department, and American Cultures we offered Principles of Sociology to five incarcerated students through correspondence. Thank you David Maldonado, Kevin McCarthy, Victoria Robinson, and Mary Kelsey for your partnership to make this possible.



PRELAW COHORT: PARTNERSHIP WITH BLUEPRINT

With support from the Defenders at Berkeley Law, we launched a Pre-Law Cohort for our undergraduate students in 2021 to provide mentorship, resources, and other support with the law school application process. We also launched a new partnership with [Blueprint Test Prep](#) who generously offered to provide scholarships for free LSAT Prep courses for our students. Nearly a dozen students have already been enrolled in LSAT preparation courses and many have attended the law school application workshops we've hosted. [Click here](#) to read more about the partnership.



[CLICK HERE to subscribe to our email list](#)

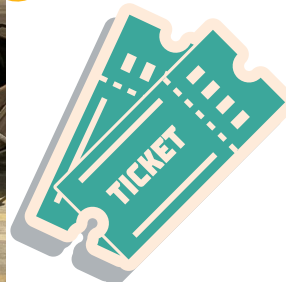
DECEMBER GATHERING AT STILES



Thanks to everyone who made it to our end of semester gathering! It was great to share a meal and some laughs before the end of the year. Looking forward to making more memories together in 2022!



Raffle
Winners!



A CUP OF KINDNESS

BY PEGGY TOWNSEND, UC SANTA CRUZ NEWS



UC Santa Cruz student Tommy Alejandrez was living on the streets when he met former NFL player Zack Follett on a busy corner in Fresno. The meeting—over a cup of coffee—sparked a friendship that would change both of their lives.

The former NFL player and the homeless man were both lost when they found each other. The football player, an ex-linebacker for the Detroit Lions named Zack Follett, had seen himself slipping into a lifestyle he didn't like and was on a self-imposed fast and ascetic retreat in an attempt to find a new path. The homeless man, Tommy Alejandrez, was addicted to methamphetamine and full of despair. He had no shelter, no food, and not even a pair of shoes since they'd been stolen while he slept. Their meeting on a busy street corner in Fresno would change their lives. Alejandrez would get sober, go to community college, and win a \$20,000 Karl Pister Leadership Opportunity Award at UC Santa Cruz, where he is now majoring in sociology and Latin American and Latino studies. Follett would start a coffee ministry at a homeless encampment and discover he could fight his own depression by service to others. Their story would eventually be told on national TV. Said Follett: "Tommy blessed me as much as I blessed him." "I was just so happy that someone saw me," Alejandrez said. Their story began seven years ago as Follett drove to the coffee shop he owned in Fresno called Kuppa Joy. A devout Christian, he said he'd found himself living a too-comfortable life and falling into sin. He was sleeping on a bare mattress in an empty house he owned, fasting and reading the Bible and a book that espoused a simple life rather than the material one the American dream promised, he said. The day he passed Alejandrez, the homeless man was holding a cardboard sign. It read: "Everybody dreams of coming here and becoming a U.S. citizen and having the white picket fence. Even Dr. Martin Luther King had a dream. Please, Lord, wake me up from this homeless nightmare."

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The sign's message struck Follett and that night, as he read in the empty house, he said he felt the spirit of God telling him, "I want you to go there tomorrow and bring that man coffee and scones and tell him that I love him." The next morning, Alejandro watched as the 6-foot-2, 220-pound Follett approached. Follett held two cups of coffee and a bag of pastries. The two settled on a nearby patch of grass and began to talk. Alejandro told Follett he'd had a good job as a tax preparer, but the recreational use of methamphetamine had turned into an addiction. He'd lost his apartment and was sleeping behind Dumpsters, eating out of garbage cans, using water fountains to bathe, and shoplifting or panhandling to support his habit. He'd been beaten, robbed, and jailed for petty theft and for possession of a shopping cart, which was illegal in Fresno. He'd contemplated suicide.

So had Follett, who'd been forced out of a career he loved by injury and who said he suffered from depression. "We all have stories," Alejandro said, "and all our stories are important." Follett drove Alejandro to a Nordstrom Rack store and bought him clothes and shoes. Then, he took him to an organic grocery store and paid for four bags of groceries before driving him back to the corner. "I said, 'All right, man, it was great hanging out with you,' and I said a prayer that God would keep him and help him on his journey," Follett said. "I told him he could find me at Kuppa Joy and I left."

Alejandro couldn't forget the respect Follett had shown him. Six months later, a desperate Alejandro was huddled under a pile of blankets across from a McDonald's. He was trying to stay warm against a brutally cold tule fog when he had a chance meeting with his cousin, who alerted Alejandro's father. His dad came to Fresno to retrieve Alejandro and enrolled him in a three-month rehabilitation program in Watsonville, where Alejandro also found out he was HIV-positive. "That was a pivotal moment for me. I decided I need to take care of Tommy and love Tommy," Alejandro said.

He enrolled at Cabrillo College, emailing Follett to tell him he was sober and pursuing a degree. Follett sent him a laptop to help him with his studies. While at Cabrillo, where he earned a 4.0 GPA, Alejandro discovered a program called Underground Scholars. It helps the formerly incarcerated or those affected by the carceral system find success in higher education. The program inspired him to apply to several UC campuses, and he was accepted by UC Berkeley, UC San Diego, UC Davis, and UC Santa Cruz. He chose Santa Cruz, which not only offered him the prestigious Pister Scholarship but also housing where he could take care of his father, who was ill.

Follett, meanwhile, also couldn't forget those few hours with Alejandro. Not only had Alejandro's story touched him, but also he'd seen how people looked away rather than meet a homeless person's eyes, turning Alejandro invisible. He began taking 10 gallons of coffee and hot chocolate to a homeless encampment in Fresno each Wednesday with the idea that, like Alejandro, those without houses deserved to be seen and listened to. He also discovered that serving others combatted his depression, he said. "It's such an incredible story of God, obedience, and perseverance," said Follett, who played football for UC Berkeley before he turned pro.

Alejandro plans to get his degree in 2023 and find a job that "gives me the ability to make an impact on others as well as myself. A job that has room for me to advance and grow in longevity and stability." He said: "I'm so grateful for the opportunities, and I want people to see ... that if you take those opportunities and are willing to do the work, there might be a path to get over the barriers in your life. It's up to you to break down the obstacles little by little" so you can succeed.

[Watch a Fox Sports video](#) about Alejandro and Follett's story.

NEW PODCAST: ON THE TIER

MADE POSSIBLE WITH FUNDING, TRAINING, & SUPPORT FROM ETHNIC STUDIES CHANGEMAKER

In July we launched our podcast, On the Tier in partnerships with Ethnic Studies Changemaker and BUS Advisor, Pablo Gonzalez. The podcast is produced by Underground Scholar leader Natalie Verducci and hosted by Assistant Director Daniela Medina. Check out the episodes we released in 2021 about the Underground Scholars Movement. We look forward to bringing you more compelling stories in 2022 including a special series on the CA movement to end solitary confinement and the historic California Prison Hunger Strikes. All episodes are available HERE.



NEW YOUTH PROGRAM: INCARCERATION TO COLLEGE

Incarceration to College (ITC) is our newest recruitment program developed to create sustainable youth justice and is founded and led at Martinez Juvenile Hall in Contra Costa County by one of our current student leaders, Shani Shay. ITC is an A-G verified Career Training Education college readiness course designed to be taught inside juvenile facilities and allow students to earn CTE credits towards graduation. ITC uses multicultural material, culturally relevant instructors, Black Feminist Pedagogies, socio-critical discussion, and increased access to college readiness to effectively enhance the educational aspirations of incarcerated youth.

Congratulations to Shani for expanding the curriculum to Alameda County this year and expanding programming to include reentry support including community college enrollment and academic coaching. To contribute to educational opportunities for incarcerated youth through Incarceration to College, CLICK HERE. Check out this article about Shani and her work. Shani is also the founder of Black USI, a statewide cohort of Black Underground Scholars members.

