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CITY

They were once convicted of felony charges. Now they help the recently incarcerated to heal

Can a trauma-focused approach in Richmond help break the recidivism cycle?

By **Thomas Lyons**
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Marvin Galdamez speaks at Richmond's Safe Return Project, where staff help recently incarcerated individuals return to civilian life, July 17, 2025. Credit: Maurice Tierney for Richmondside

In 2019, Marvin Galdamez landed his dream job working as a bilingual peer advocate at San Francisco's Hospitality House, a nonprofit that serves marginalized communities in the Tenderloin neighborhood.

"They took me in, and, man, I was just on cloud nine," Galdamez said. "I started making a decent living wage. I had every [insurance] benefit you could think of: life, death."

But on his 19th day on the job, Galdamez' boss called him in. A background check had revealed a felony conviction from 2005, a criminal record Galdamez said he had openly shared during the application process.

Regardless, Hospitality House terminated his employment, handed him his final check, and escorted him out of the building.

"I was so crushed, embarrassed, humiliated," Galdamez said. "And so there I was with a nice, sizable check in the Tenderloin — heartbroken, devastated. I was like, 'Okay, I could do a couple things. One, I can go cash this check real quick. Get a lot of money, buy some alcohol, get some weed, maybe some little powder, and hire some company for the night. And I'll be set. I'll forget all my problems.'"

But then — reckoning with his loss of employment, the rent due, the days that lay ahead — he remembered the **Safe Return Project** (SRP), a Richmond nonprofit launched in 2010 that provides support to people as they come home from incarceration. Galdamez had applied for and received a fellowship from SRP but turned it down once he was hired by Hospitality House.

He called the organization's Civic Education Director, Chala Bonner, to ask if there might be a spot for him.

Years later, Galdamez, 44, now a father of three living in East Oakland, is a full-time staff member at SRP. In 2023, he co-founded the program's intergenerational support group, LAT&X, a stylized acronym for "Learning to Address Trauma and Etcetera" that harkens back to the group's initial status as a grant-funded Latino youth support group.

At LAT&X, he said, the emphasis is not on controlling behavior, but on understanding the root causes of it. And, in an intergenerational setting, the elders — or "OGs," as the members call them — can create a supportive space for youth to stay engaged and off the streets.

Galdamez and his peers believe that the benefits of this collective reckoning with trauma and its consequences are twofold: they provide healing for the formerly incarcerated, and they demonstrate an alternative vision for the future for at-risk youth.

Safe Return's approach focuses on healing trauma

Devin Estrella, 19, a recent Richard Boyd Fellowship graduate and Safe Return Project staffer, leans into his mother, Maria Vargas. Credit: Maurice Tierney for Richmondside

The Safe Return Project began in 2010 as a partnership between the Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization, the Richmond Office of Neighborhood Safety, and the Pacific Institute, an Oakland-based research thinktank.

What originally began as a gun-violence prevention organization, the nonprofit has become a hub of community-based research and political activism. Under California's Proposition 47, for example, SRP has organized reclassification events, where people with specific nonviolent felonies can reclassify them as misdemeanors. SRP has also partnered with the West Contra Costa Unified School District to reform its hiring practices to "ensure job applicants with prior convictions have a fair chance at employment," according to the **SRP campaign archives**. SRP also works with formerly incarcerated people to ensure they receive fair housing and employment opportunities.

“”

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— Marvin Galdamez, Safe Return Project staff member

SRP, Galdamez said, works to smooth the reentry transition for the recently incarcerated in the hopes that greater stability will lead to fewer recidivists and healthier communities.

"Can I get a place to live? Can I get a job? Can I live in peace? A lot of time the answer by society is 'no,'" Galdamez said. "You are still getting punished again and again, over and over."

At the core of SRP's human-centered approach is the Richard Boyd Fellowship. Every year, the program accepts a handful of formerly incarcerated people for a paid, year-long series of workshops focused first on self-healing and then on community organizing. Fellows are paid $17.50 an hour for roughly 20 hours a week, SRP Executive Director Tamisha Walker told Richmondside by email. The program, which costs the nonprofit SRP $300,000 a year, is mainly supported by donations, she wrote.

Galdamez — who, at 25, was sentenced to ten years in prison — said that the fellowship sessions helped him understand his traumatic past and the systemic forces oppressing him.

"What I was getting here was more than just a paycheck. I was learning that all the things I did wasn't because I was fucked up," he said. "You were just playing the cards that you were given, and you were dealing with traumas the best that you could."

Born into El Salvador's civil war in 1980, Galdamez said his grandmother raised him after his mother immigrated to the US in 1981.

"I've been seeing [violence] since I was born, literally," Galdamez said. "I have to defend myself, because I don't want to be the victim."

When his mother moved him and his younger sister to the US in 1984, he recounted being spanked and being left home alone for long stretches at age four.

"I had been carrying that [trauma] and acting accordingly, using the same reactions and habits that had kept me safe," he said. "It's all that we knew. It's what kept us safe — running and fleeing, or standing and fighting."

Every Wednesday afternoon, Galdamez reinforces this understanding with the LAT&X group, a mix of the formerly incarcerated, their children and partners, and local youth.

Pedro "Dro" Bernal outside Richmond's Safe Return Project, July 17, 2025. Bernal, 23, who, like many SRP staffers, was formerly incarcerated, tells his youth members, "It's better to make a friend than an enemy." Credit: Maurice Tierney for Richmondside

Galdamez co-founded the group with Carlos Fernandez and Pedro Bernal, who goes by Dro and works as a Credible Messenger for SRP's youth justice program.

After playing pickup basketball with youth members in Hilltop last week, I spoke with Bernal about what he said is the importance of keeping at-risk youth engaged in supportive spaces.

"He's at a critical age right now," Bernal said, indicating a 13-year-old participant. "They need male role models."

Bernal, 23, grew up in San Pablo, and like many SRP staffers, was formerly incarcerated. He served a weekend in a Las Vegas jail after being convicted for concealed carry of an unlicensed firearm at age 19. The work he does now

targets the root causes of violence, he said.

“You might not be able to tell,” Bernal said, turning to the high schoolers drinking water in the shade, “but there’s a couple of youth out here who would be ready to fight each other.”

Bernal said he tells his youth members, “It’s better to make a friend than an enemy.”

Many of those members joined the LAT&X group later that afternoon at the SRP office at 1011 Macdonald Ave. In each meeting, participants share a catered meal before discussing their weekly highlights and challenges. Each participant shares one “group agreement” — say it ugly, one mic, right to pass — and a gift for which they’re grateful. Many thank the gift of life.

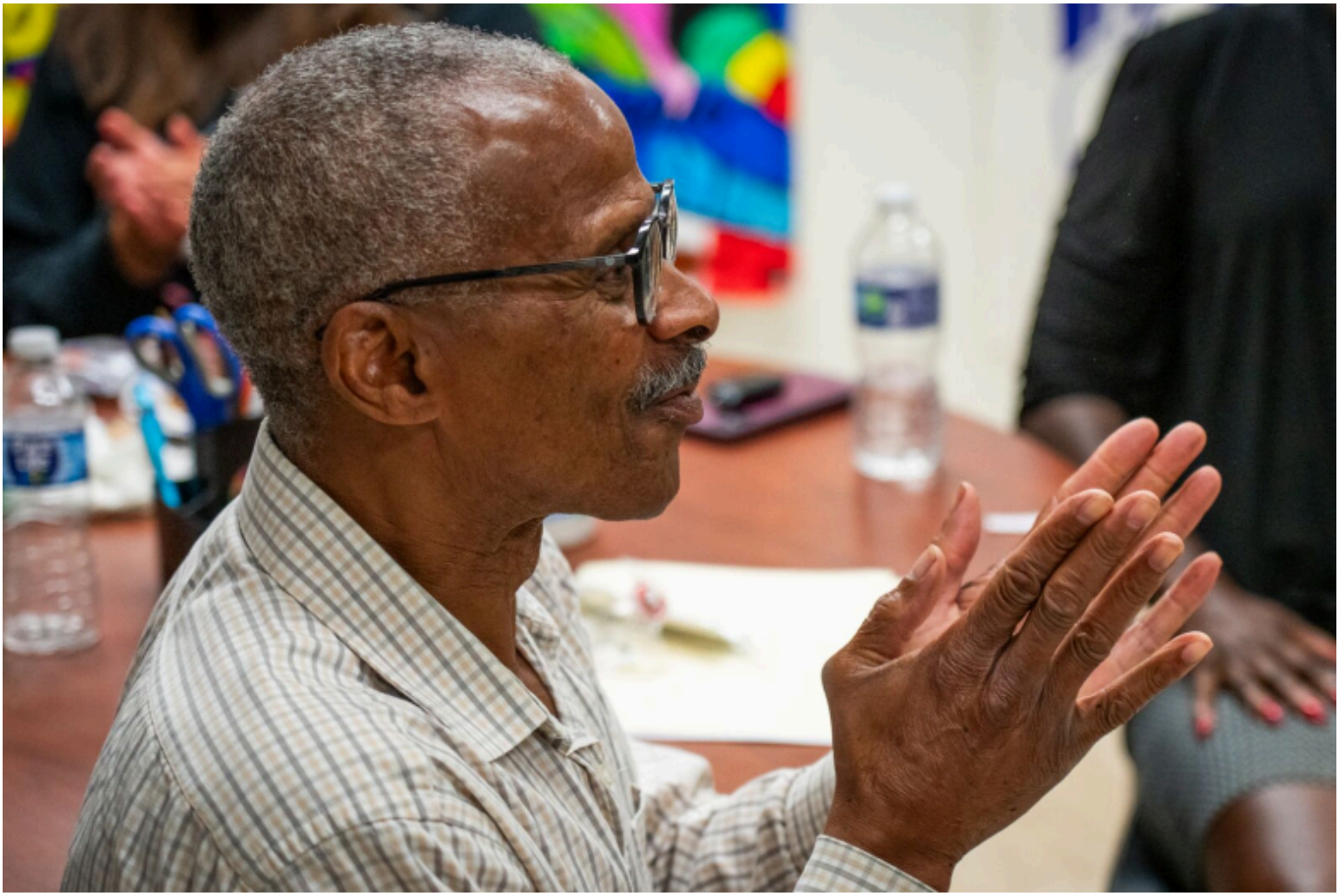
“Alive and free,” people repeat throughout the session. “Alive and free.”

After one participant described how their recent health problems led them to visit a doctor, Galdamez jumped in.

“We are so used to suffering,” he said. “We all have pain. We think it will go away. If you have pain, go to a doctor — do not suffer.”

Galdamez’s advice felt specific, but it also addressed a larger tension at the core of SRP: how can the group teach people who may not have been well served by society’s systems how to work with and benefit from the tools of those systems?

‘My walls were my society. What was I going to do now?’



James Jackson applauds at Richmond’s Safe Return Project, July 17, 2025. Jackson, who was incarcerated for 23 years, says connecting with young people empowers him. Credit: Maurice Tierney for Richmondside

James Jackson has been attending LAT&X meetings for a little over a year, he said, and he recently applied for a facilitator role with SRP.

Jackson grew up in North Richmond in the 1970s, a place and time he described as lawless.

“The neighborhood I grew up in, you could get anything you wanted: heroin, cocaine, weed, you name it,” Jackson said. “There were really no rules. ”

At 66, Jackson’s memory is still attentively tuned to dates and figures. He remembers, for example, his high-school track records (10.3 seconds in the 100 meter dash, 22.3 in the 220 meter race), but also his high-school suspensions (20), and every date of his arrests.

“When I say my record was extensive, I mean extensive,” he said.

In 1997, a third robbery conviction triggered the Clinton administration's "Three Strikes" sentencing minimum: 30 years to life, Jackson said.

After 23 years, prompted by a national reckoning with mass incarceration, Jackson was released in May 2020 — right into the pandemic.

"My walls were my society, now I'm being released into this great big world," he said. "What am I going to do now?

Having anxiety upon release is common, Galdamez said. When SRP began operating in 2010, four of five Richmond residents released from incarceration in the previous three to 18 months were unemployed, and seven out of ten lacked stable housing, **according to SRP**.

"I had nothing to identify with," Jackson said at a recent LAT&X meeting.

But now, Jackson said, he hopes to be the person with whom young Richmond residents can connect — experience creates credibility, the SRP mantra goes.

And connecting with young people empowers Jackson, who loves to laugh and share the possibility of meaning and joy after incarceration.

"At the end of the day, I can still smile with my F-ed up smile," he said, referring to his missing teeth. "I see implants in my horizon."

‘The streets wanted me back’

Carlos Fernandez views Safe Return Project as a space to bring the older and younger generations into the same room, to share alternative visions for the future. Credit: Maurice Tierney for Richmondside

Fernandez, the third founder of LAT&X, has lived out a story of family dysfunction but also personal growth.

“This story is a cycle of incarceration,” he told me in SRP’s back courtyard.

Growing up in North Richmond, his father was incarcerated during Fernandez’s childhood. His return from prison brought further trauma to the family, said Fernandez, who described instances of domestic abuse.

“My dad, the protector of my life, became a threat to my life,” he said, which warped his sense of safety and security.

“To be secure in the streets, you need a weapon,” he said.

Soon, he was regularly breaking into homes to steal guns, cash, and laptops, he said. Eventually a felony conviction put him in juvenile detention, where he spent stints from 2011 to 2017. He was in prison when his first daughter was born.

After he was released, Fernandez worked a series of jobs — delivering for companies such as UPS, Hello Fresh, and Target — before he learned about the Richard Boyd Fellowship. At the time, Fernandez said, the minivan he drove to the interview was full of bullet holes from shootouts.

“The streets wanted me back,” he said. “I was faced with so many challenges that would have pushed me back to the streets if I hadn’t grounded myself with what I learned [at SRP] — learning about trauma, learning about the risk factors.”

Fernandez views SRP as a space to bring the older and younger generations into the same room, to share alternative visions for the future.

> *“These kids were from all over Richmond. They were supposed to grow up hating and killing each other. Now they’re adults. They’re alive. They’re not shooting at each other.*
>
> — Carlos Fernandez, Safe Return Project staff member

“It’s important for me to connect the young people with the elders,” he said. “It’s important for me to connect moms and sons and people that are just struggling in the streets, to build a community where we can share knowledge.”

The roots of LAT&X were formed in a youth group Fernandez started in 2020, he said. He took special focus on four young men.

“I expressed to them what they can be in life,” he said. “I gave them my all.”

Yet, one was convicted of a home invasion charge, the other three of robbery and murder charges, Fernandez said.

“I lost all four of my kids to the system. I thought I gave them everything,” he said. “I thought they could change.”

“I beat myself up about it for a while, and then I learned to accept that I can still support them,” he said. “They’re young, and they’ll have a release date one day. I’m not giving up.”

A year later, in 2021, Carlos invited his nephew, a high-school freshman, and his friends to SRP. More and more came, until 50 students were in the group, a precursor to the intergenerational LAT&X which was founded two years later.

“These kids were from all over Richmond. These kids were supposed to grow up hating and killing each other,” Fernandez said. “Now they’re adults. They’re alive. They’re not shooting at each other.”

For Fernandez, the act of telling that story is as important as the story’s action. Growing up, he said, no one told stories of a violent-free future.

“There’s this culture of telling young people if they don’t get it together, they’re going to end up in the prison or the grave,” he said. “So many times people told me that. At 14, I said, ‘My life is going to end before 25 — I’m going to the prison or the grave.’ I wanted to get that as a tattoo: prison or the grave.”

“If you tell a kid he’s a loser, he’s going to be nothing and be just like his father. That kid will carry that weight, carry that on his shoulder, put it on as a tattoo,” Fernandez said.

“Prison or the grave. Prison or the grave. Prison or the grave,” he repeated. “They start to accept it.”

And then he turned to me and rolled up his shirt.

On his left shoulder, tattooed in black ink: a tracing of his daughter’s footsteps.

“I love them and they love me,” Fernandez said of his children. “Nothing else is more important.”

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