

# CAL STATE EAST BAY'S ROLE MODELS PROGRAM GIVES STUDENTS NEW PERSPECTIVES

February 17, 2016

Cal State East Bay criminal justice student Jaspreet Singh knew he was helping at-risk teenagers when he visited Tennyson High School in Hayward as part of the university's Role Models program. What he didn't realize was how much he'd be helping his own budding law enforcement career.



Yet when Singh interviewed for a trainee position at the Contra Costa County Sheriff's office, they wanted to know how he was able to get recalcitrant teens to open up and confide in him, and how the empathy he developed might make him a better deputy.

"I'm in the sheriff's academy right now. The Role Models program is what actually got me hired on," Singh said. "When I started the interview process, I was surprised how much it correlated. I don't have prior law enforcement experience, but they asked, 'What have you done? How do you communicate with someone who doesn't want to talk to you? How do you build rapport with someone like that?'"

Dr. Silvina Ituarte, director of the Role Models program and a professor of criminal justice, started the mentoring and community engagement program three years ago as an outgrowth of CSUEB's Restorative Justice program.

Restorative Justice promotes the concept of holding individuals accountable for the harm they committed, trying to get them to repair that harm to the victims and their community, and teaching them skills to prevent crime recurrence.

Rather than merely lecturing the students about those principles, Ituarte said the Role Models program enables them to see the principles in action. "Empathy and compassion are the number one things I want them to get out of it," Ituarte said. "They need to be sensitive, as opposed to authoritarian. Some students watch too much TV and think police work is 'Dirty Harry.' That's not what criminal justice is about. You need to treat people with respect or it's going to hurt you in some way."

That notion ties in to the national debate about police prejudice, highlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement. Ituarte says police agencies are looking to Restorative Justice as a way to re-establish connections with their communities.

"Not only does the Role Models program allow our students to tie in what we're teaching in class to what's happening in the community, but it is also a great way to develop empathy for future law enforcement and community corrections officers," said Dr. Dawna Komorosky, chair of CSUEB's department of criminal justice. "Graduates of the program become not only police, but correctional officers and probation and parole officers. We are teaching future criminal justice professionals to enter their fields with a certain amount of compassion."

Two aspects of the program have proven to have a particularly large impact.

One is called Truancy Circles, in which basic Restorative Justice principles are applied. Rather than blaming and punishing someone for missing class, the person is brought into a circle to see how his or her absenteeism affects others in the class. "It's more about getting support, getting the community involved, building stability," Ituarte said. "It helps them build the relationships they need."

The other is called Photo Voice, in which high school students are given disposable cameras and told to take photos illustrating different themes, such as family, hope, goals, vision, or future. The CSU students take the photos, blow the best from each high school student up to 8x10, and put it on a mat. They hang it at the university and bring the students for a visit. Ituarte says when the students see how their work is valued, their self-esteem begins to grow.

Along the way, the CSUEB students also have a positive influence on the students they mentor, in part because they relate to the younger students' lives so well.

"When I was in high school, I was getting into a little trouble," said Angelica Barrera, a senior in the program. "I was hanging out with the wrong crowd." She signed up for a criminal justice class just to fill her schedule, she explained, and the teacher was so engaging, it propelled her to go to college and seek a career in the field.

At Tennyson High, Barrera said she mentored a girl who struggled with her classes and drew inspiration from Barrera's story.

Similarly, Singh said he grew up poor in tough neighborhoods, with a less-than-ideal family situation. In high school, some of his friends went to jail, and others were shot and killed. He started working construction jobs as a junior in high school, but he met a police officer at a gym who persuaded him to take more classes. "My perspective on the police was always, 'Those are the bad guys,' until I met some who changed my perspective. I realized they're human, just like us."

Singh's tough background helped him connect with the kids who are a little troubled. "I had a lot of tattoos and a beard," he said. "When I walked in, they gravitated to me. They would relate to me."

"I told them what I did, and what I'm doing now," he said. "They tell me what they're doing. One kid told me he deals drugs, and I said, 'Dude, you've got to turn your life around.'"

Another student was a real troublemaker in class, but by the end of the semester, Singh said, "He told us, 'My mom just died. They're sending me to live with my dad,' who he hadn't seen in 10 years. He was finally opening up and telling us why he was behaving that way. He just needed some guidance."

Lori Villanueva, the principal at Tennyson, a high school of 1,300 students, said, "The University Role Models program is probably the best program I have on campus. The impact of having university students on campus, talking to my students, interacting with my students, having been just like them and being able to understand them, can mentor them, talk about going to university — there's nothing else that I have that can have an impact like that."

Many of the Tennyson students have never been to CSUEB, even though they can look up to the hills and see the campus from their school. Not only do they draw inspiration from the CSU students, but opportunities like Photo Voice bring them to campus, so they can start envisioning themselves in college.

"Our goal," said Ituarte, "is to provide the kids at Tennyson with hope so they can make a good decision. Many of them have never seen that college is a possibility for them."

The Role Models program started with a federal grant of \$320,000, but now needs to raise money to keep going. For more information, see the program's Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/universityrolemodels/>), or contact Ituarte at [silvina.ituarte@csueastbay.edu](mailto:silvina.ituarte@csueastbay.edu) (<mailto:silvina.ituarte@csueastbay.edu>).

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25800 Carlos Bee Boulevard | Hayward, CA 94542 | 510-885-3000

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