

# MEET *the* CLASS OF 2024

## Independent Forensic Gang Expert College



### Serafin Leon

He/Him/His

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At 17 years old, Serafin Leon was charged and subsequently convicted of a gang-related murder of which he was innocent. He served 32 years in a California prison, 20 of those 32 years in the Security Housing Unit (SHU) at Pelican Bay State Prison due to his association with the EME and Sureños gangs. As a prison gang affiliate for many years, Serafin gained a wealth of knowledge and insight into the dynamics and inner workings of the gang lifestyle and subculture, including why some youths join gangs. During his confinement in the SHU, Serafin educated himself and underwent a positive transformation. He parted ways from his gang affiliation and went on to earn four associate degrees and countless self-help certificates before his release from prison in 2020. Post-release, Serafin earned his certification as a forensic gang expert from Loyola Law School's Independent Forensic Gang Expert College.

Currently, Serafin works as a Credible Messenger supervisor at the Anti Recidivism Coalition. Credible Messengers mentor youth, most of whom are gang members, in Los Angeles County's Secured Youth Treatment Facilities (SYTF). Part of Serafin's work requires him to provide written or verbal progress reports of the youths to courts or classification committees.

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### Sam Lewis

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Sam Lewis is the Executive Director of the Anti Recidivism Coalition (ARC). Previously, Sam served as the Director of Inside Programs. A former life prisoner himself, Sam understands the various obstacles, challenges, and difficulties the prison and reentry populations face. In 2017, Sam created the Hope And Redemption Team (HART), a first-of-its kind initiative he built from scratch. The Hope & Redemption Team (HART) is a group of nine former California life prisoners who go back into California state prisons to provide hope, demonstrate that redemption is achievable, and to prepare participants for successful reentry into our communities. The Hope and Redemption Team is now a statewide program that is offered in every prison.

Since 2015, Sam has led a team of Credible Messenger Mentors who support youth currently housed at Barry J. Nidorf Juvenile Hall. The unique mentors are trained in Transformative Mentoring and use a peer-to-peer Credible Messenger model to encourage incarcerated youth to believe in themselves and pursue their education while incarcerated. In 2018, Sam was the recipient of a Bank of America Neighborhood Builders Award, Uncommon Law's Uncommon Heroes award, 2019 Danger Man Award, and Fearlessly Authentic Leader Award.

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### Sam M. Cunningham

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For many years, Sam Cunningham fully submerged himself into the gang culture, participating and promoting all ideologies and doctrines of the gang culture. In May of 1986, he was arrested, tried and convicted of first degree murder. He served 30 years in prison. 20 years into his sentence, he slowly began to distance himself not only from the presence of the gangs, but more importantly, the mindset of the gang culture. By 2006, he was deeply involved in programs such as Anger Management; Alternatives to Violence; Conflict Resolution; Effective Communication; Getting out by Going in; just to name a few. But the one group that really allowed him to see and understand the dysfunctional and distorted beliefs and values of the gang culture was Criminals and Gangmembers Anonymous (CGA).

Since his release in 2016, Sam has earned an AA degree in Social Sciences and an AS in Human Services. He also started his own mentoring program, "I Am My Brother's Keeper" and has worked as a Reentry Specialist/Youth Outreach Coordinator for 6 years at Santa Cruz Barrios Unidos. He works with men, women, youth and adults who are both presently or formerly incarcerated. He has advocated in court for youth currently committed to DJJ in returning to their homes or step down programs.

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### Roderick Grayson

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Roderick Grayson has over 43 years of gang experience and was exposed to the realities of gang life at a young age. Grayson was sentenced to triple life, plus 16 years and served 28 years and 4 days in prison. Grayson has received certificates in CGA- Criminals and Gang Members Anonymous, Emotional Recovery, SAP- Substance Abuse & Behavior Modification Program, Mapping Your Steps, Time Out for Men, Breaking the Cycle of Male Violence and the Chairman of AA/NA. Grayson is highly recognized in multiple communities as "The Change Agent" striving for peace. "Change doesn't happen until you do it."

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### Quan Huynh

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As the bestselling author of "Sparrow in the Razor Wire: Finding Freedom from Within While Serving a Life Sentence," Quan shares a compelling narrative of redemption, offering insights into the motivations that led him to join a violent street gang, and his profound journey towards self-forgiveness and understanding.

Quan's expertise has illuminated stages at TEDx and Talks at Google, and his story has been featured in Entrepreneur Magazine, PBS NewsHour, among others. Currently the Executive Director of Defy Ventures in Southern California, Quan champions the mission to reshape mindsets and provide individuals with criminal histories a genuine chance at a second life.

Quan's approach to gang rehabilitation is not just academic but lived, offering a nuanced perspective that is invaluable to defense attorneys seeking an authoritative voice on gang behavior, motivations, and the potential for change. His work underscores a deep understanding of the challenges and complexities faced by those entangled in gang life, making him an indispensable resource for legal professionals seeking expertise in gang culture and rehabilitation strategies.

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### Jose Nogales

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Jose Nogales is a freelance paralegal who specializes in criminal, civil and constitutional law. His legal education and credentials were all obtained during his incarceration. When he was only 14 years old, he was charged as an adult and sentenced to 80 years to life in state prison. It took 16 long years before he successfully vacated his sentence and was released. He has extensive understanding of the gang culture as it exists inside and outside of prison and is excited to be an asset in these revolutionary times.

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### Joel Aguilar

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From my initial encounters in juvenile detention to subsequent experiences within county jails and prisons, my interactions with numerous gang members provided invaluable insight into the complex dynamics of these groups. Beyond mere observation, my time facilitating self-help and process groups within CDCR facilities involved extensive personal interactions and profound conversations, fostering a deep understanding of gang slang, unspoken rules, and cultural customs.

I transitioned into the reentry field, and specialized in aiding adults and young men with a history of gang involvement. I have gained unique insights into the challenges of reintegrating into society post-gang affiliation. My specialized knowledge of specific Latino gangs further enhances my ability to provide tailored support to individuals seeking to transition away from gang life. Furthermore, I hold a Bachelor of Arts degree in Liberal Arts, complementing my practical knowledge with academic insight. Finally, with 60 hours of Independent Forensic Gang Expert College training, my journey from the streets to reentry services and training has molded me into a gang expert, offering a comprehensive and authentic perspective built on decades of personal experience and professional engagement.

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## Grecia Resendez

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I am a system-impacted mother and scholar who was born and raised in San José, California. Despite being pushed into continuation schools and being a teen mother, I made my way to UC Berkeley where I obtained a Bachelor's and Master's degree. I hold a B.A. in Political Science and Chicana Studies from the University of California, Berkeley and a Master in Public Affairs from the Goldman School of Public Policy. Most of my research has focused on the school-to-prison pipeline, education pedagogy, liberation movements and international conflicts. Before entering the world of public policy I was a manager at a large ecommerce company. Currently, I am a policy analyst with the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, a nonprofit based in San Francisco.

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## Gilbert Bao

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Gilbert Bao is an Independent Forensic Gang Expert graduate of LMU Law School and a Substance Use Disorder Certified Counselor II. He served 21 years in prison after being sentenced under CA gang enhancement laws for attempted murder. Gilbert was exposed to drugs and gangs at an early age and placed in the infamous McLaren Hall in LA County. He became a member of an LA street gang by the age of 13 where he would spend most of his youth inside LA juvenile halls and the California Youth Authority. Gilbert has facilitated numerous groups with active and non-active gang members for 20 years. In April 2018, he was awarded a certificate of recognition by California Senator Anthony Cannella for organizing National Crime Victims' Rights Week. He was found suitable for parole and released by California Governor Gavin Newsom under the new Assembly Bill 1308 on November 28, 2019. Two years later, Gilbert returned to provide recovery treatment to men affected by drugs, trauma, and mental health in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Today, Gilbert is a program director for a 25-bed detox center in South Los Angeles, volunteers in his community passing out food and clothing, and provides his professional insight into the complexity of gangs.

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### April Atkins

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As a former pioneer female member of a Compton Crip gang, I have over 25 years of immersive experience within the universal gang culture. Throughout my tenure, I garnered respect and admiration, leading to the recruitment of numerous male members who looked up to me as a role model. My dedication to the widespread belief that toxicity commands respect and fear provided me with a profound understanding of the global gang landscape. I have interacted with gang members from diverse cities, states, nationalities, and ethnicities, expanding my insights into the multifaceted nature of gang dynamics.

Having transitioned from the gang lifestyle, I now devote myself to mentoring both current and former male and female gang members. My extensive knowledge and life experiences uniquely position me as a testament to the realities of gang life, membership, and the complex factors that drive individuals toward gang involvement. I am a living embodiment of the expertise and credibility needed to shed light on the intricate world of gang culture, providing invaluable insights drawn from personal experiences and lived realities.

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### Adrian Caceres

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I am a senior undergraduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, majoring in Sociology, with an expected graduation in Spring 2025. My academic journey is marked by my involvement in research focused on the experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals seeking higher education, and I plan to pursue Ph.D. programs in the fall. Although I am not employed in a conventional role, I support myself through research stipends and scholarships. My background includes a history with Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), beginning at age 13, leading to periods in juvenile facilities, homes, correctional camps, county jail, prison, and solitary confinement. Despite MS-13's reputation for violence and organized crime, my experiences provided a foundation for my education at the Independent Forensic Gang Expert College at LMU Loyola Law School. This program, which covered court procedures, case law, gang laws, and the judicial process, enriched my understanding and equipped me with a unique perspective that informs both my academic and community service endeavors.

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## Sergio Coronel

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My name is Sergio Coronel, and I am the founder of the nonprofit Youngsters for Change (YFC), where I am currently the Executive Director and gang consultant. My work at YFC is focused on a credible-messenger mentorship approach to enhance a strong relationship with the client in preparation for court and my areas of studies as an undergrad and graduate scholar in evidence-based research on gangs and juvenile delinquency. Since 2020, I have worked with youth in the juvenile or criminal justice systems and the community. A significant majority of these youth were African American or Latino and involved with gangs or lived in communities impacted by gangs. In 2022, I was retained as a gang expert and assisted the Juvenile Supervisor with the Fresno Public Defenders Office in the first release of a youth from the Secure Youth Treatment Facility (SYTF). In 2023, I was retained as a gang expert in three transfer hearing cases in Fresno, Sonoma, and Sacramento County. I also have lived experience with the Fresno juvenile system and gangs. I graduated with two bachelor's degrees in history and criminology and earned a master's degree in criminology, focusing on gangs, from California State University, Fresno. In criminology, my interest was looking at gangs and reentry. I am also a graduate of the Independent Forensic Gang Expert from LMU Loyola Law School.

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## Jayda Raspberry

She/Her/Hers

Jayda is a graduate of the Los Angeles Training Institute for Alcohol and Drug Counseling and is a Certified Drug and Alcohol Counselor. She has worked at Dignity and Power Now, Californians United for a Responsible Budget (CURB) and Amity Foundation. She is currently a Life Coach at Butterfly's Haven. She is a 2024 graduate of the LMU Loyola Law School's Independent Forensic Gang Expert College. The comprehensive 6-week course covered the law, rules of evidence, and court procedure taught by practicing attorneys and Loyola Law School faculty.

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## Bertha Cordova Zaragoza

She/Her/Hers

Bertha has been a community advocate for 20 years and is passionate about helping individuals know their rights and navigate the complexities of the criminal justice system. She is a recent graduate of the LMU Loyola Law School's Independent Forensic Gang Expert College. The comprehensive 6-week course covered the law, rules of evidence, and court procedure taught by practicing attorneys and Loyola Law School faculty.