

'The Closest Thing to Heaven'

Gregorio, 24, grew up in a violent home in West LA, then became a violent young man himself, committing crimes until he finally faced multiple life sentences.

"I had a Christian girlfriend who would tell me about God and to read the Bible. To make her happy I would, but my heart wasn't there," Gregorio says.

To avoid a life sentence, he applied to every recovery program he could while in prison.

"I was done with this lifestyle," he says. "I didn't want to do this anymore. I wanted to change. I wanted a way out. I just didn't know how to do it."

"God, if You're real, I'm done with this life," he cried out. "Give me a program. Help me to change."

The very next day, a pastor visited his prison unit, came directly to Gregorio's cell and told him about the Dream Center. Gregorio applied, was accepted and is now halfway through the yearlong men's discipleship program.

"The day I came, I was dropped off by the Sheriff's Department," he recalls. "As soon as I stepped on the campus, I saw people smiling. They were happy. To be honest, I thought, What is wrong with them?"

Now, he's smiling, too.

"Every other place, I was frowned upon because of my violent past and my gang affiliations," he says. "But not at the Dream Center. The Dream Center took me in. I'm just so thankful to God. There's no way to explain it. I wake up here and look around and am so amazed. 'I'm really here. God has been so good to me. He has brought me here.'"

Gregorio now visits his kids and helps them with their homework. His son loves attending church at Angelus Temple.

He calls the atmosphere at the Dream Center “beautiful.” He loves the morning prayer walks that set the tone for the day. He loves learning about the Bible—and he especially loves serving in the kitchen.

“It’s amazing because I get to prepare the food and cook it,” he says. “Then we stand on the line and hand it to families. There were times when I was young and we didn’t have that assurance of that next meal. So for me, it’s so much more to give a child a plate of food when they need it.”

He enjoys friendships in place of rivalries with men of diverse backgrounds as well.

“I get to call other men ‘brothers’ and love on them and be loved by other people,” he says. “We’re all at peace. That’s the biggest thing here. Never in my life have I experienced peace until I came here, and I experienced it through God.”

The Dream Center, he says, is “the closest thing to heaven that I could explain.”

“I don’t want to limit God on what He could do with me,” Gregorio says. “Whatever He wants me to do, I will do it, because of what God has delivered me from. All I want is to serve Him. I’m thankful. I really am. People who are rejected by the world find acceptance in this place.”