

# Bridge Back: An island of hope for returning ex-offenders

*By Dennis Schatzman  
Special to Sentinel-Voice*  
LOS ANGELES — While on the re-election circuit, Gil Garcetti, the embattled Los Angeles County district attorney of O.J. Simpson fame, promised a powerful group of black ministers he would draft legislation that would require offenders who are high school dropouts to earn a general equivalency diploma (GED) before being released.

If Garcetti makes good on his promise, he would be prudent to find a community-based correctional care facility with a proven success rate to implement the program. One such facility is Bridge Back, an inmate outreach center right smack in the middle of south Central Los Angeles.

But I warn you, although the place houses up to 77 non-violent offenders serving the last four months of their sentences prior to parole, you have to look

very hard to find it, unless you know exactly where it is. These inmates are rarely seen and seldom heard.

Bridge Back is operated in a quiet unassuming building that sits near the busy corner of Western and Vernon Avenues. One doesn't see young black men standing around chillin', drinking 40 ounce beers, shooting craps or engaging in any other neer-do-well type activity. Instead there are dozens of young men inside working, studying, going out on jobs, attending schools and the like. As they carry out their daily activities, you don't hear a peep out of them.

A reporter who used to catch the bus at the corner every day never knew the place was there until he heard the residents were about to be moved back to county jail by the Department of Corrections as "a precautionary measure" during the final days of the federal trial of the four

LAPD officers charged with beating black motorist Rodney King.

Celes King, III, state president of the Congress of Racial Equality of California and the members of the local businessmen's association heard about the discriminatory move (similar centers located in white neighborhoods were not forced to relocate) and "persuaded" the state to put a stop to such action. They argued successfully that the Bridge Back residents were never involved in the April 29, 1992 riots that followed the officers' Simi Valley acquittals. So why the harsh treatment, they asked?

King, a local bail bondsman and prominent civil rights leader, has been a long time friend of Roy Evans, Bridge Back's founder, administrator and proprietor. "I have known Roy for nearly 30 years," beams King, whose office is walking distance from the facility. "We answered

his call for help on that matter mainly because Roy is the kind of guy who doesn't cry 'wolf.' When he says 'let's, we say 'go.' When he says 'Hal,' we say 'leluha.' It's as simple as that. And CORE makes no apologies about its support of Bridge Back."

Evans, a Willie Wood (of Green Bay Packer fame) look-alike founded Bridge Back 14 years ago. He operates the facility of a \$950,000 yearly budget. A staff of 16 persons provides 24 hour service (which includes job preparation, placement, substance abuse assistance, stress management, victim awareness training and computerized educational services), seven days a week. Two parole agents are assigned to the premises. Since its inception, over 5,000 people have passed through its doors, receiving food, lodging, counseling and training before being reintroduced to their home communities.

"Bridge Back has come a long way from its beginnings as an anti-substance abuse program," Evans explains. "In the early days we took advantage of the opportunities provided by the War on Poverty and Model Cities programs to create and establish programs of our own through which attacked some of the problems overwhelming our community. We networked, we opened our organizations, staffed them, and started to work on the needs among our people."

In a community where nearly one-third of all black men are either in jail, on parole or on probation, correctional services has unfortunately become an unwelcome growth industry. Yet it is usually the court system, the lawyers and the jail houses that reap the lion's share of the benefits. Evans believes more

## Kinnaird

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vision and they must make certain the vision is being achieved. If it is not then you have to make some changes."

Echoing Hillary Rodham Clinton's book, *It Takes a Village* Kinnaird continued, "Education success requires a community approach. To be successful educators must communicate these ideas into the community because without an ongoing dialogue the community will not know what the school is actually doing. We need the buy in from teachers, parents, students and businesses to make certain educational goals are achieved."

And what are those goals? "First," he said, "Our schools must be safe. Students must know the rules and the consequences if they disobey those rules. There must be no inconsistency in how the rules are applied. When students sense inconsistency, there is an erosion in their confidence that the schools are places for them."

Another goal is to make certain that our schools are truly centered around our students' needs. "The Advanced Technologies Academy is data driven. We try not to make arbitrary decisions. Each school needs a defined mission which is based on the desired learning outcomes. We make an effort to know our students," Kinnaird said. "We find out about their previous educational experiences. We learn about their strengths and weaknesses and their socio-economic backgrounds. We want successful students and to help them become successful we need to think of them as people."

"As a principal, I have to assure positive educational outcomes. The leader of the school must also be a model, visible and supportive, but also, when necessary, a critic. All of the principal's efforts should be to support teachers and the students. To assure success, you have to be there at the beginning and the end of the road. And sometimes the road to success is long."

While a national debate rages about the failures of the educational system and the inability to teach children the "The 'R's", Michael Kinnaird, Nevada's Principal of the Year has built and leads an educational program which is based on "The '3 S's" — *students'* needs, *sound* programs and goals for *success*. To do this he has recruited knowledgeable teachers committed to quality teaching. He has partnered effectively with Advanced Technologies Academy's parents and with the large community. He has received strong support from the Clark County Board of Education. Kinnaird and his faculty and staff at the Advanced Technologies Academy has shown that it can be done.

Bridge Back-type facilities are needed, especially in black communities.

"California and other states must take immediate steps to treat low risk, non-violent offenders differently than violent predatory offenders," Evans says. "We must expand the number and type of community corrections programs for these offenders. For every bed the state establishes in a community-based corrections facility, it can save the cost of building a new

prison cell." In an era where politicians are promising to build more jails, they need to look closely at the Bridge Back concept. It works, and at a fraction of the \$400,000 per year it costs to house a man who is convicted of cashing a bad check.

*Dennis Schatzman, a legal affairs writer based in Los Angeles, is a journalism professor at CSU at Fullerton and co-author of "The Simpson Trial in Black and White."*

## Kwame

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nothing seems fair ... Does this sound like the way you would like to live your life? It's so easy to make the same mistakes I did, but here are a few tips on how to avoid falling into the same trap I did.

Always remember this, 'For every action there is a reaction.' What I am saying is, learn to take responsibilities for your actions...

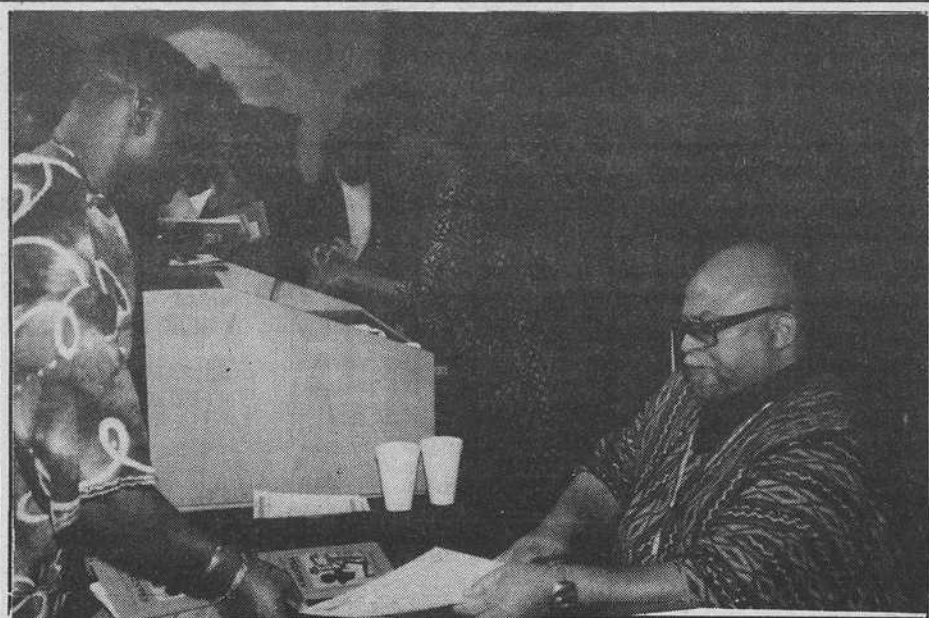
Trust me, it's not worth it! I've been living in here more than ten years and every night, I lay in my bed thinking about how my life could have been different. It hurts, but I can't blame anyone but myself. Your life doesn't have to be like this, set goals for yourselves and always, think before you act."

## Education

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we have not and will not take the time to learn the ABC's of economic empowerment. Our ancestors taught the principles many years ago; now every group except our own practices them. The July 1996 edition of *Black Enterprise Magazine* is dedicated to the power of the black consumer. Find a copy, read it, and let the education begin.

*James Clingman is a freelance writer in Cincinnati, Ohio and former editor of the Cincinnati Herald newspaper.*



### Sharing Knowledge

Dr. Maulana Karenga, the founder of Kwanzaa signs autographs during his recent visit to Las Vegas at the West Las Vegas Library Theater. Photo by Savoy/LVS-Voice

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