

Announcer: Welcome to Hancock Conversations, an Allan Hancock College podcast. Join President Dr. Kevin G. Walthers and members of the Hancock community, as they explore the stories behind the people and places that make Allan Hancock College the unique hub for learning that it is today. You're sure to learn something new, and even have a little fun along the way.

Kevin Walthers: Welcome to Hancock Conversations. I'm Kevin Walthers, Superintendent/President at Allan Hancock College. We're glad you joined us today. It's a, it's a great conversation we're going to have today with Arturo "Cheech" Raygoza, a 2020 Hancock graduate and founder of the Beyond Incarceration Greater Education Club, also known as the B.I.G.E. Club. Cheech, how you doing today?

Arturo "Cheech" Reygoza: I'm doing great, Dr Walthers. Thank you for having me.

KW: Great. So, as, as mentioned in the name of your club, you're a formerly incarcerated student and now you brought, you brought that to campus and finished your degree, and you're actually working on campus with students. Tell us a little bit about the programs that you're offering for formerly incarcerated students here at Hancock.

ACR: Alright, well we'll start with the B.I.G.E. club. B.I.G.E. is Beyond Incarceration Greater Education, which is a club I helped co-found in 2016. After serving 13 years in and out of prison, I came to Hancock to look for a better way of life. And once I got to campus, I was I felt out of place. I felt like I didn't belong. I was 46 years old at the time, and I just, I felt like I didn't fit in. My first day of class was my teacher's first day of teaching. Ms. Lynn Valencia Becerra, and she literally changed my life by giving me the time of day, asking me questions, showing me – literally walking me on campus to resources on campus – such as the Learning Assistance Program, EOPS. If she wouldn't have walked me through these steps, I would have quit. So, my first question was to her was, "Where are the students like me at? Formerly incarcerated, on parole, or probation? So, she tried to find out, but because of confidentiality she couldn't. But she knew another member, well another person who happened to graduate from Hancock, and was at the time, working for parole, a Mr. Leonard Flippan. And he gathered about five parolees together. And we had our first meeting. Out of the five, I happened to know three of them, I was in prison with. And I didn't know they went to campus, they didn't go to college. I didn't know this. And so, after that first meeting, the dean of students, Ms. Yvonne Teniente, told me, "Hey, Cheech if you have a second meeting, you could start a club." And I was like, huh, you know like, I really didn't understand the value of this. I just knew I needed people like me, so I could feel comfortable. And we had a second meeting and the B.I.G.E. Club was born.

KW: Nice. And now how many members do you have in the B.I.G.E. club now?

ACR: Alright, so we started with five. And now we're around 35 or 40.

KW: Tell us. Tell us a little bit 'cause when, when COVID hit it, hit your group pretty hard. Tell us what the B.I.G.E. Club did as we started doing classes remote and there wasn't that on-campus accountability.

ACR: Yeah, so, you know as, as formerly incarcerated, um, a lot of us were used to doing lockdown lengths of time, but the anxiety, the stress, everything else that came with it, we weren't used to, and a lot of. We're losing a lot of members to relapse, to just quitting school because there was no physical contact. And I outreached. I got a hold of my instructor, we've got a hold of Ms. Ornelas, we've got a hold of you, Dr. Walthers, and we advocated for space on campus. And we were able to have this space in A-103, temporary for now, but we are getting members coming in, using the computers, printing out homework, and we've been there a few weeks now. And I've noticed, me personally, I've noticed how much it is appreciated. The students coming in are thanking me, "Hey, Cheech, thank you for what you're doing. We really need this." And so, I believe that this little space on campus is going to make a

turnaround. It's going to improve the college education. And it's going to help us succeed, COVID has really impacted us. And we're trying to make the best out of any possibilities we can right now.

KW: Yeah, and I think as you guys had shared with us is, you know, it's one thing that you guys, you guys knew how to be locked down because you've done that before but, but what really happened when you weren't on campus is you lost structure. And even, even when you're incarcerated, there's a lot of structure that goes around that. And people telling you where to go and, and I think, you know, what we heard from you, was that, hey, we want to be accountable and it really helps when we can come in person and see a faculty member or see each other, and know that that everything's gonna be okay.

ACR: Yes, that's exactly what, what happened.

KW: So, we also have a men's support group on campus, and this came out of a study that we did. We did some evaluation, and we found out that our male students were falling behind. And, in particular Latino male students were struggling, and we wanted to make sure that we could help those students catch up and be successful. So, you were you are a part of that men's support club as well, correct?

ACR: Yes. When it first came, came to be a couple years ago, right away, I joined. So, I was one of the first ones to join that club. And, you know, Dr. Hernandez, Ricardo Navarrette are just great support. I mean, these, these men have guided me through my journey, since I started on campus. And now the men's support group what they do is, because the male population is was dropping out was, if there's opportunity for work, they're going to get the work. They're going to do the overtime, they're going to forget about school. And the men's support group helps you stay focused, manage your time, and succeed. And we're hopefully changing these numbers, because the group continues to grow and grow. And as men we support each other, and everybody in the, in the men's support group has different career paths. And we're able to, to associate with somebody that's on the same path as us and help us out and guide us to succeed on campus.

KW: Yeah. So, and then from there you're also, you're also in the Beyond Barriers program, which is similar to B.I.G.E. but there, there's a difference in Beyond Barriers. Tell us. Tell us what the Beyond Barriers group does.

ACR: So, the Beyond Barriers came to be because of B.I.G.E, which Beyond Barriers is, is a whole different entity. They help the formerly incarcerated coming out of state and federal prison. And I've been fortunate. We've, we've gotten two grants, one for \$340,000 and one for like \$110,000, for the formerly incarcerated. And we were, I was able to be hired, and to work for Beyond Barriers, which I'm truly grateful for. And now, we outreach to the formerly incarcerated coming out of state prison and federal prison and help them enroll in college.

KW: And we're seeing that, has a really positive impact on campus and beyond and, you know, the Beyond Barriers. There's also all preventive in there. You were telling me the other day that you'd been down at Los Prietos, the boys camp down there, and sharing your story with those guys. How did that go?

ACR: Um, okay. So yeah, so, with the Beyond Barriers, we're limited to what we could do on outreach, because that is just for people coming out of state prison. And so, as a B.I.G.E. member, um, I don't, I don't discriminate, I don't. It doesn't matter if you've been in prison or not, if you're socially-impacted, if you happen to know anybody who has been in prison and been in jail and has impacted your life, I welcome you to the club. And so, with that being said, that's how I managed to go to Los Prietos Boys Camp and speak as B.I.G.E, as a recovering addict. I went, I'm a recovering addict I went as N.A. and I spoke. And that really has an impact, because at 13 years of age, I myself was at Los Prietos Boys Camp

and did my first year stretch there. And when I was there, nobody ever came and told me, "Hey Cheech, if you go to college, you know your life could change, some of these doors go open." No, I thought I was supposed to go to prison. I thought I was supposed to be a dope fiend all my life. I didn't know better. Growing up in society I grew up in my surroundings. I followed suit, I followed what my homies were doing and everybody around me. And so, I went out to Los Prietos and I spoke to the kids. Me and another member from Hancock, and another member from N.A., went out there and spoke to these kids. And it planted a seed, it planted a seed because just recently, somebody that was there. Seventeen-years old, doing his time. He connected with me, he heard my story. And he said, "I, I don't have to go this route." And, you know, I told him I go, you know, I go, "If you guys want to learn how to roll up your mattress and do burpees and do prison life, I can show you that. If you guys want to learn a higher education, and a new way of life, I'll show you that too." I go, "But the choice is yours. I'm just here to tell you that you have choices, you don't have to go to prison." You know, and I guess the seed was planted, because last week he came to see me. And he managed to get his GED, and now he wants to come to campus and, and enroll in college, and that feeling is unexplainable. It's just, you know, I'm just overwhelmed with joy that he did that. And so, you know, we're hoping that we could get him enrolled and get going for January 2021.

KW: Yeah. And of course, he's eligible to be a Promise student coming out of Los Prietos. And we have some special scholarship just for Los Prietos graduates, part of them from the college and part of them from the Rotary Club. Here the Breakfast Rotary Club that I'm a member of and the Goleta Rotary Club, they work with Judge Staffel and Judge Garcia, and are really big proponents of supporting that program. So, so, young men, and now they have a women's program. The kids who come out of the Los Prietos program, they get to be Promise students at Hancock. And we've got some special scholarships for them so that'll, that'll help him get on his way as he, as he gets enrolled.

ACR: Yeah, I didn't know that. I'm gonna reach out to him and let him know.

KW: So, how's your family doing?

ACR: Oh, we're doing good. Everybody just got out of class right now. So, we got three college students, and one high school student in the household right now, so it gets kind of crazy. You know, everybody has their Zoom going on and, you know, we live in a three-story condo out here in Los Alamos, and Wi-Fi is spotty. And so every once in a while, we get kicked off the internet but we have to be patient. And you know it's it's different. It's different, but we're managing, we have a lot of resources, with help with. We got a hotspot from, from Hancock, you know, thank you guys for that. We've got the laptops we need. And so any, any resources that I gain from the college, I go to my daughter's high school and I go like, "Can you guys provide this for them? You know they're doing it at Hancock." And so far it's worked. So I appreciate all your guys' help, Dr. Walthers.

KW: There's a lot of lifting is going into this, so we want to make sure everybody can finish because we know that time is the enemy. So, so you're still taking classes, correct?

ACR: Yeah. I just got out of my sociology class right now.

KW: So, what degree are you working on now?

ACR: I just graduated with three A.S. degrees in automotive technology, and I don't even work on cars anymore. So I switched careers to sociology and will transfer. And I have, maybe I think four, more classes to take after these two. and I'll be able to transfer out to either UCSB or to Berkeley.

KW: Nice. That'll be awesome. Well, you mentioned a lot of folks that helped you out here, and I want to make sure that you know that we appreciate the help you're giving to your colleagues, because you're, you know when things got really bad last year, you stepped up and kind of rallied everybody to help them understand that they could get through it. And that was that helps you guys get to graduation. And so, as we go out, why don't you tell us a little bit about that day, about graduation. That was a great day when you walked across the stage, you know, we weren't allowed to, we weren't allowed to shake hands because of the disease, but when I saw you on stage I couldn't help it, I gave you a big hug. And that was the highlight of my day. Tell us. Tell us what, what it was like for you and your family for graduation as we as we wrap up here?

ACR: Oh, wow. Yeah, so I'm trying to not get choked up about this, but yeah, that was that was a big and exciting moment for me. My granddaughter was there my, my boys, my whole family was there. And it was amazing. You know, like I said, Lynn Becerra has changed my life. And she was there to introduce me as I walked across the stage. And man, it was, it was heartfelt, you know through all my trials and tribulations, you know, my shortfalls everything I've been through. I've managed to, to earn my degree. The walk on stage, you know, Dr. Walthers, I watched that video over again, and I go like, "Man, I'm the only one he gave a hug to." And I appreciate it, was, it was heartfelt you, know? When, when I seen you standing there and your cap and gown. First thing that went through my head is like, "I want to be the first formally-incarcerated dean, you know, and those are some goals I'm setting for myself. You know I want to come back. I want to support my community, you know. Like at a young age, I destroyed this community, I did a lot of stupid things I ain't proud of. And, and I've managed to change my life and now I'm able to put a Band-Aid on it right now, and, and hopefully fix, fix the things I broke. And I'm there, just like Lynn was there to walk me, literally walk me, hold my hand and show me all these resources on campus I'm paying it forward. That's exactly what I do now. I've literally met people in the parking lot because they're scared to get off their car, and come on, step on campus. And I've been able to go to the car and calm them down, and literally walk them into financial aid to get their H number, and the Learning Assistance Program has been so supportive, and they helped us so much, you know? And man, all these resources on campus. They're not known. And I don't know, I just find out that it's my duty to, to let it be known, you know, because if Lynn wouldn't have introduced me to all these resources, I would have quit.

KW: Well, Cheech, you're doing a great job and you know, we talk about on campus our, we have a new slogan, "Changing the Odds." And what we talk about is how we can, we can celebrate you know, people who overcame the odds, and we're certainly going to celebrate how you overcame the odds and the other members of the B.I.G.E Club. But, but really the long term goal is to remove those barriers so, so that we're changing the odds for the next generation that's coming through, and, and you're helping us do that and we're glad you're here. And we're grateful that you took some time to share your story with us. So thanks for being here. And we'll talk again soon. Okay.

ACR: Thank you for having me. I appreciate you.

KW: Alright. This has been Hancock Conversations. We've been talking with Cheech Raygoza, who is the co-founder of the B.I.G.E. Club here on campus, formerly incarcerated students, and a great leader on our campus. We look forward to seeing you next time.