

# HD Peer Newsletter

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## HD Alumni Gustavo Licona

Gustavo Licona works for North County Lifeline, a non-profit social services agency that serves the Coastal area starting with Vista on the 78th corridor, as the Lead Outreach and Gang Prevention Specialist/VGRIP Case Manager. Since graduating in 2008, Gustavo has been making a great impact in the lives of at-risk youth, documented gang members, and/or youth on probation. Each day he devotes himself to mentoring and counseling each of his clients, and works with each individual in making small changes, with hopes of them making bigger changes towards a non-violent and successful life!

I highly recommend anyone interested in social services, case management, and/or non-profit to meet with Gustavo. He will give you words of honesty and encouragement on working in a career that may be stressful and challenging, but if you are passionate about helping others and your community, you will be choosing a rewarding career where you will be making a difference in the lives of the population you are serving. If you would like more experience working in the field and/or at-risk and documented youth, contact North County Lifeline located in Vista; Gustavo says they are glad to give volunteers and interns' hands on and face-to-face experience!

Gustavo's interview gives great insight as to what to expect when working in social services, and in particular case management. I hope every reader finds this interview as insightful, inspiring, and meaningful as I have. Once again, Gustavo, thank you for your honesty and advice!

\*Interview Q&A on pages 2-4

## Alumni Association

Class of 2015! Would you like access to campus resources after graduation? Sign up for the Alumni Association and have access to the following resources:

- Career Center
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### Membership Dues:

- \$30 for one year
- \$300 for lifetime membership
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## Fall 2015

If you are interested in being the next peer advisor, please contact

Dr. Bigham at  
[ebigham@csusm.edu](mailto:ebigham@csusm.edu)

### ***What is your current profession?***

As the Lead Outreach & Gang Prevention Specialist/Vista Gang Reduction Intervention Prevention Case Manager I do case management and outreach. The VGRIP program is a new 3-year contract that serves targeted youth from local schools in the Vista Unified School District. Right now I am working with kids who are either at-risk or documented gang members. I currently have ten cases from one of the elementary schools served through VGRIP where there is a group of kids ages 10 and 11 who have within the last year started their own group or club, they haven't called it a gang yet, but they started "gang" initiations where they are beating up kids for 15-30 seconds with the purpose of joining the club. Other youth being referred are documented gang members who live in Vista or attend a Vista school; they are referred by law enforcement, probation and or school resource officers. Last year my caseload was up to 40-45 at one time, but I served 180 youth throughout the year, and this year it's only 30 for the whole year. I will be working with the youth a minimum six months and up to a year. Through case management some will complete Gang Awareness group, Positive Action, Seeking Safety, Decision Making, attend educational fieldtrips, individual counseling etc. Each case is properly assessed and assigned specific goals for the youth and parents. Parents are also referred to parenting or family counseling. Some outreach includes going out to the community and doing presentations on gang awareness, the agency, and our programs/services offered through North County Lifeline. I've done presentations at MAAC Head Start programs, Palomar College, CSUSM, and middle and high schools in North County.

### ***What does case management consist of?***

Depending on an individual need basis through proper assessment, the main service for me to provide is Positive Action curriculum along with psycho educational youth groups such as Decision Making, Alcohol Tobacco and other Drugs, Gang Awareness, Anti-Graffiti...whatever it is that they need, along with individual/family counseling and any type of support whether academic or personal. Most of my current clients have to write an essay on consequences of gangs and an apology letter to the school, to the victims, and to the parents before I start working with them in-group. It just depends on the case and what comes out of the assessment. I have one or two that aren't doing any groups, they are just doing individual counseling and that's because I assessed that they don't meet the criteria for group or they just need more individual counseling. We also do field trips to Homeboy Industries, which is one of the biggest non-profit organizations that works with adults and youth who are former gang members, are trying to leave a gang, or are getting out of prison. We go three times a year, with a different group each time and take up to 25 clients each time. They get a tour of the whole place, but the most important part for us is the testimonials. Kids who are documented (been in the gang for four or five years, or on probation) come out of that with a whole different idea of 'I don't have to dig a hole that deep; finally I understand that I need to change my decision making'. We also take kids to CSUSM, local community colleges, and the San Diego medical examiner's office (which is a new thing). It's a three hour program and the first two hours is a private presentation on cases related to suicide, gang violence, drinking and driving, drugs, all the above. They see actual crime scene photos and the last thirty to forty-five minutes the youth tour the medical examiner's office and walk through the freezer. The freezer is the most impactful part of the program. The smell of death is overwhelming and it doesn't get any better. I've been there 5+ times and it never gets easier. But again this is more for kids who are documented, in the system, and it's like a scare straight without screaming at them, but a "listen this is what you're doing, this is what these kids were doing, and this is what is going to be happening soon if you don't change". Every time we get feedback from documented gang members, or repeat offenders, who have basically said, 'this is straight, this is real' or 'I'm going to stop associating with these guys' or 'I need to stop using drugs'. Sometimes the smallest change, such as reducing the drug frequency from 7 days a week to 5, is a huge factor in determining the client's success in the program and in society.

We take any change! For me this is one of the most powerful field trips that we do and it just doesn't impact the youth we take, but staff who attend. I've had staff thank me after the fieldtrip stating it's made them think about some unsafe habits like texting while driving.

### ***Why did you choose HD?***

I started at community college and started with graphic design and honestly I had one of the hardest times picking a major and that's why I did graphic design because I liked art. I did that for about a year and a half and then I was like you know what I don't like it. It was a good way for me to cope with certain things, but I didn't see myself doing it for the rest of my life, it wasn't fulfilling. At the time I started working as a mentor/tutor for AVID and GEAR UP at San Marcos High School and I got to see the potential I could have with the kids, with mentoring and with tutoring, and that's when I said well maybe I want to be a teacher! So I did liberal studies at Palomar College for another year and afterwards I was like no I don't want to teach. I was just so undecided. To be honest, college was never on my mind growing up. I just wanted to graduate high school to make my parents proud. So by the time I got to Cal State I had already been doing a lot of work with TRIO programs and had been working with Gear Up, AVID, and Upward Bound and I saw myself going into the academic advising field. I had a friend from high school who went to CSUSM and did the HD major and one time I just randomly ran into her and she was like 'yeah I'm doing this major because I want to go into academic advising' and 'I was like well I do too'! So I thought I would give it a try and I kept it. I liked the major and I had finally made up my mind about it and I was happy. I loved the professors and it was the one department where I just felt at home, where as the other ones I just felt undecided and not sure about whether or not I saw myself doing that for the rest of my life.

### ***How has your HD degree helped your professional career?***

I am thankful for the educational skills and professional training that HD provided me such. It's one thing to have the street life knowledge, to be able to work with the population I work with, but it's another thing to have the educational part to be able to best serve the population. I gained confidence and strengthened my skills through the HD major. Every single kid that I work with has experienced some type of trauma and the mental health is always a concerning factor for these kids. Once I started working with kids who were at-risk through Lifeline, I knew this was an area I wanted to grow in. I was up for the challenge and it hasn't been easy. I've had to leave my personal assumptions, stereotypes and/or preferences to work with youth who have had specific charges. I had no problems working with youth involved in gangs, who were killing each other for no reason, but at one time I had difficulty working with a 14-year-old that was facing rape charges. At the time my daughter was born and I took it very personal. The knowledge and training through HD and support from Lifeline helped me overcome those barriers and by doing so I provided the best support and case management to the 14-year-old. So I'm thankful for the knowledge I gained through the HD major, and I think it really prepared me, because when I graduated I had no experience in the field of social services, non-profits, case management...especially case management I had no experience and it was different than what I wanted to do after graduation. I didn't have a plan B!

### ***Originally you wanted to be an academic advisor, so why did you choose your current career?***

The reason why I am still in the field and at Lifeline is I always wanted to do something with gangs, because of personal experience, and I wanted to give back to the community, but there were never programs that were available for me to work through, the only programs that were there were faith-based. I had the perfect plan of graduating and working with TRIO programs. I graduated and no jobs were available in that field. Eventually, I want to do academic advising, but right now my focus is working with gang prevention and intervention services. It's an intriguing population and I love working with them! Academic advising is one topic that I incorporate in my current position so in a way I'm still doing it.

***What qualities do you need to be successful within your position?***

To me it's been patience and passion that have kept me strong and have given me the energy to continue in this field. There are a lot of other skills that one needs such as communication, ability to work under pressure, adaptability, ethics, reliability etc... I think that for any non-profit you need to have patience to deal with the politics, with big caseloads and with daily crisis. You need the passion to wake up and say, 'I want to do this tomorrow; I want to do this today.' It's a very stressful job. There's not one weekend where I don't go home thinking 'Are my kids, client caseload, going to be okay when I come back.' Summer is coming up and for us it's very concerning, because they aren't doing anything. There are no summer school programs and the majority of these kids parents work, which means they will be unsupervised until parents get home. They are out in the park hanging out and the risk factors increase drastically, so again it's going home and wondering if my kids are going to be safe. Specific contracts require specific goals and outcomes, but in order for you to serve a specific client or the population you have to do a very in depth assessment of the case and by doing that you have to be willing to do the work and to support the family to the fullest. You're going to have a caseload of thirty or forty and each one of those cases needs the same time and energy. I have been at Lifeline a little over seven years and I learn every day that I come in to work, but the patience and the passion have been the two skills that have guided me through learning and expanding my knowledge to best serve the families I work with. It is a stressful job, but you have to have self-care; you have to take care of yourself! It's very important to be professional and to keep your work at work. You need to understand that work is work and home is home. This is something that I still have to separate specially going home on weekends.

***What advice do you have for graduating seniors?***

Get their masters! Don't stop; if you want, get a part-time job within the field. Before you graduate do research on the field, volunteer, but most importantly as soon as you graduate, or before, apply for your master's degree. It's just very competitive now. Also, working in this field you are going to have to put a little more time and energy to serve the population. It's part of the responsibilities. A lot of the times we are the only mentors for these kids, the only positive influence that these kids have in their life and I know we cannot give it to them Monday through Sunday, but if you tell them 'I am going to help and support you,' then you are expected to be there. Consistency!

*Thank you to each alumnus for being a part of our Spring 2015 HD Peer Newsletters, and for providing words of encouragement and inspiration that we will use in our educational and professional futures! If anyone would like information on how to contact any of the alumni (Veronica Gutierrez, Kimberly Gerardi, Shannon Nolan, or Gustavo Licona) please feel free to contact me by email at [mcmil016@cougars.csusm.edu](mailto:mcmil016@cougars.csusm.edu)!*

***Congratulations Class of 2015!***

***I wish you the best in your future endeavors!***

***Monica McMillan***