

# Changing Lives From the Inside



*“Without Freedom to Choose, I wouldn’t be free today. I now work at a law office for one of the attorneys who represented me, train for the Modesto School District, and consult for the Modesto Police Department on race relations. I also secured a contract with Life Moves in San Jose to help reintegrate homeless individuals into their families, and I’ve just started my own LLC. The education, love, and self-esteem I gained from Freedom to Choose transformed my life and future. If you have the opportunity to support, do it, because many of us will make it back to the community, and how we show up may be in your control.”*

– **Michael Baldwin**

Program Alumni, Returning Citizen and  
Freedom to Choose Board Member

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315 Meigs Road Ste. A295  
Santa Barbara, CA 93109

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**The Freedom to Choose Project**

[www.freedomtochooseproject.org](http://www.freedomtochooseproject.org)  
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Santa Barbara, CA 93109  
(805) 323-6543



Three incarcerated women work in a Trio at Valley State Prison for Women. (photo by David Sand)

Just 26 years old and the mother of three young children, Rhonda Leland found herself behind bars serving a life sentence at Valley State Prison in Chowchilla. It would be 32 years before she was even eligible for a parole hearing. Staring into the abyss of endless days in a prison cell, she realized that whatever she had been doing wasn’t working, and she needed a new strategy for just living life. She knew she had to start with her own self-esteem and anger, and as she looked around her, she understood that her fellow convicts faced the same dark shadows.

She found the names of psychologists in self-help books from the prison library, and she began writing to people she thought might be able to help.

One of those letters landed on the desk of Dr. David Paul, who along with his wife, Bonnie Paul, were graduate faculty in Psychology. The duo ventured to Chowchilla and gave their first workshop on communication skills, understanding oneself, and boosting self-esteem. “Many of the women had never felt truly heard or valued before,” Leland remembers. “The simple act of having a conversation where someone

listened to them made a significant difference in their lives.”

The Pauls started to make regular visits to Chowchilla. Eventually, in 2010, the Freedom to Choose Project was born, an organization whose mission, “transforming lives from the inside,” is not only literal and metaphorical, but effective, impactful, and statistically successful. Over the years, the program evolved to include every state prison in the State of California, and the Santa Barbara County jails. .

The name of the organization was developed from the work of Viktor Frankl, much of it codified during his imprisonment in a concentration camp. “It focuses on the ability to choose one’s response regardless of



Ms. Rhonda Leland (photo by David Sand)

## Support the Power of Second Chances

Since 2004, the Freedom to Choose Project has offered workshops, groups, and correspondence programs that focus on behavioral growth, trauma healing, and leadership, while developing emotional intelligence and communication skills. These programs have reached nearly 10,000 participants, providing over 220,000 hours of education across all California state prisons and the Santa Barbara County Jail.


- \$250 – helps 2 students for 3 months
- \$500 – helps 5 students for 3 months
- \$1,000 – helps 10 students for 3 months
- \$2,500 – helps 5 students for 6 months
- \$5,000 – helps 10 students for 6 months
- \$10,000 – helps 20 students for 6 months
- \$25,000 – helps 60 students for 6 months

circumstances,” state Drs. Paul, drawing the connection between a concentration camp and a prison.

“If you’d asked me if I wanted to do service work in a prison, I would have said, ‘Forget it, not me. I cannot do that. I’m not qualified. I’m too scared,’” Dr. Bonnie Paul recalls. “I overcame all of that. It’s taught us that in order to do the skills we teach, we have to use them.”

A pilot study further highlighted the Freedom to Choose Project’s impact, revealing that women who completed five or more workshops experienced a recidivism rate of under 5%. This stands in stark contrast to the average recidivism rate of 49% for women in

California during that period.

But the anecdotal successes are perhaps the most convincing, and none more so than Rhonda Leland, whose initial impulse to break the cycle and free herself sparked the entire endeavor. Hers is one of thousands of stories of healing, redemption, and transformation. After 28 years of working on herself through the Freedom to Choose workshops and curriculum, she was granted a parole hearing before her initially scheduled time. She is now not only living a life of freedom on the outside, but is working as the Education and Project Coordinator for the organization she helped found, the Freedom to Choose Project. 

**The need for rehabilitation programs is at an all-time high, making funding essential to expand our programs.**

**THE FREEDOM TO CHOOSE PROJECT**  
Change from the Inside

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Drs. Bonnie and David Paul (photo by David Sand)



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