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FINDING COMMON GROUND



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ALLEN BURNETT IS CURRENTLY SERVING A LIFE SENTENCE IN THE CALIFORNIA STATE PRISON AT LANCASTER. HE IS ALSO A COLLEGE STUDENT PURSUING A BACHELOR'S DEGREE IN COMMUNICATIONS FROM CAL STATE LA. **ZION HOLMES**, ALLEN'S STEPDAUGHTER, IS A COLLEGE FRESHMAN, PURSUING A BACHELOR'S DEGREE IN ENGLISH FROM CAL STATE LA.

Allen is currently enrolled in the first cohort of the Prison Graduation Initiative program at California State Prison, Los Angeles County (Lancaster). "In the 90s there were no college programs for people in prison. I felt really hopeless," says Allen. "But thankfully I came here and had this opportunity."

Cal State LA is the only University in California to offer an in-person bachelor's degree completion program for incarcerated students. Launched in 2015, the program is an initiative of the University's Center for Engagement, Service, and the Public Good, in partnership with the College of Professional and Global Education and the College of Arts and Letters. Cal State LA receives support for its program from the Opportunity Institutes Renewing Communities Initiative, a program designed to build a network of bridges from corrections to college in California. Cal State LA is also one of only 66 universities in the country selected to participate in the Second Chance Pell Pilot program which allows eligible incarcerated students to pay for their education.

"Being able to encourage my stepdaughter to pursue her education at Cal State LA, and hopefully a master's degree as well, transcends what I am able to achieve," continues Allen. "I am very proud of both Allen and Zion," says Dnai Burnett, Allen's wife and Zion's mother. "Especially when we are all together, I see the appreciation and love they have for each other and for learning."

Allen and Zion each belong to a community of learners. For Allen, earning his bachelor's degree allows him to serve as a force for good within prison as he mentors fellow inmates and students. Should Allen be released prior to completing his degree, he will be automatically enrolled as a Cal State LA student and can complete his education at the main campus.

"To be able to go out in the world and learn more...well knowledge is power!" says Zion. "I want to get my education and share

what I've gained with others. That's really what Allen and I are propelling toward." In fact, Zion is considering traveling abroad as a language teacher, working in public and private schools throughout the world.

Allen and Zion motivate and support each other through prison visits and phone calls. "Being able to encourage my daughter to go to college brings tremendous value to my life," says Allen. "The sentence I received says that I have no value. But when I'm in class and we have the opportunity to talk about this, and I think about my stepdaughter, we begin to think otherwise."

Education, whether inside or outside of prison, is transformative. For Allen, it offers a second chance to determine the direction of his life, and to impart his knowledge to others who feel hopeless. For Zion, education is the key that will help her open doors to possibilities and opportunities that will allow her to assist others in the same way her father has been helped. "Even though they are separated by distance, I like to think of Allen and Zion as fellow students," says Dnai. "Because they have a common goal, they motivate each other to do their best." □

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Facts

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Photos this page from top: 1 > Zion Holmes graduates from Innovation Charter High School and on her way to attending Cal State LA. 2 > In 2014, Allen Burnett graduates from Coastline Community College with Zion and Dnai in attendance.

Photos opposite page clockwise from top: 1 > Dnai Burnett on the steps of Capitol Hill for the 2017 National Day of Empathy. 2 > Allen Burnett (center) is visited by his family at Lancaster Prison, (left-to-right) Michael, Gabriel, Solomon, Zion and Dnai. 3 > Allen Burnett with his Cal State LA cohort at Lancaster Prison. 4 > Zion and Dnai at Cal State LA.