

Redemption realized Paroled from prison, Vallejo native gives back by volunteering with football team By RACHEL RASKIN-ZRIHEN, Times-Herald staff writer Vallejo Times Herald Article Launched:10/16/2006 06:13:02 AM PDT

One minute he was a Vallejo teenager making some dumb teenage decisions and the next he was in prison, facing a life sentence for kidnapping, carjacking and robbery.

1. Released two years ago, after more than a decade behind bars, former Vallejo High School football player and local dignitary's son Mike Pendergast didn't slink away to somewhere no one knew his face or name. Instead, Pendergast came home, where he provides a real-life example to the Vallejo High football team members he volunteer coaches.

This doesn't surprise his father, Vallejo school board member Bill Pendergast.

"My boys have a real understanding of themselves and the community surrounding them, and want to be full participants in life," he said.

And Vallejo's students seem to be benefiting.

"He inspires me to do better in school and not to make the mistakes he made," said 15-year-old Vallejo High sophomore and junior varsity football player Gilbert Garcia. "He encourages us not to make those choices, and he lived it, so it means more."

Garcia's teammate, sophomore Chris Ambeau, 14, said he's picking up the same message.

"I've learned not to mess up. To stay in school. And it means more coming from him because he went to jail and came out and turned his life around," Ambeau said.

Redemption is a word often used but rarely realized. Pendergast's case may be the real deal. He blames himself for his wasted youth, beginning with failing to heed advice about paying better attention in school.

"It was peer pressure and materialism and laziness," said Pendergast, 32. "When I graduated from high school, I had few options besides junior college because I didn't take the necessary courses to get into a university. I wanted to have fun and be around my teammates."

While still in high school, Pendergast said he went for what looked like the easy money - selling marijuana.

"It was too easy to make money that way," he said. "I watched my dad get up at

5:30 every morning to open his auto shop and that wasn't for me."

Then, Pendergast and some buddies hatched a plan. They'd hijack a woman's car, throw her in its trunk and use it to rob Wal-Mart of 30 pistols they hoped later to sell.

"It seemed like a glamorous thing to do," he said. "It wasn't smart, but I'd been led to believe I was untouchable."

But after the 1993 crime, a tip led police to the Pendergast family's home at 2 a.m. It was a day the 1992 Vallejo High graduate said he'll never forget.

"It was very scary. I was afraid because the life of lies I'd lived with my parents and the community was blowing up in front of me," Pendergast said. "And it was sad. We were unsophisticated 19-year-old kids with no clue what the consequences could be."

Bill Pendergast described "a stunning, terrifying moment," the night they took his boy away.

As he was driven from his parents' home that night, the younger Pendergast said he knew his life as he'd known it was over.

"It really hit me then and I knew I wasn't coming home for a while," he said.

The journey from prison

"Seeing your mom through thick Plexiglas will change a man," Pendergast said.

"I'll never forget the look of deep disappointment in my parents' eyes that day."

Sentenced to life with the possibility of parole after seven years, Pendergast's parents stuck by him, because "you never abandon your child, ever," his father said.

Mike Pendergast's prison ordeal took him from San Quentin for processing to Vacaville's Solano State Prison, he said. While inside, he married an old high school friend, to whom he's still married seven years later. And he made an attitude adjustment. In fact, he said going to prison may have been the only message loud enough to get through to him at the time.

"If I knew then what I know now, I would never have sold that first bag of weed," he said. He's also changed his focus - from the pursuit of money to living his passion for football. And he's discovered that coaching young athletes is his calling, he said.

His son's 2003 release from prison was among the happiest days of his father's life, Bill Pendergast said.

"When I saw him walking up those steps that I'd watched him walk down handcuffed, it was quite a moment," the elder Pendergast said.

After his release, Mike Pendergast attended and played one football season for Solano Community College, to prove to himself and his family that he wasn't beaten. He then applied as a volunteer coach at his high school alma mater. He got the position, but his parolee status prevents him from becoming a paid school district employee. During the day, Pendergast works for a local law firm. A 2005 newspaper article brought Mike Pendergast's story out in the open, and soon after, his players began asking about it, he said.

"I decided when the timing was right, I'd discuss it with the kids," he said. "We took a conservative approach to it. As the kids bonded with me and the other coaches, I started sharing my story."

Pendergast said he tries to make himself available to kids who find themselves at the crossroads he did at that age, and help direct them down a better path.

"I don't mind telling them. It's a lesson. I use my story as an example. There are a lot of choices for Vallejo kids - university to gang membership, and this school has a history of both and everything in between."

Not everyone is comfortable with a parolee coaching JV football, he admits.

"I'm grateful for the community support and I understand the disdain from some quarters," he said. "I also accept that I've done what society says you have to do to be redeemable."

While he said he's ashamed of his crime, Pendergast believes he's paid his debt to society and has been forgiven by the middle-aged woman he and his partners held in a car trunk for about two hours.

"She's the most gracious human being I've ever met. She forgave me and without that I wouldn't have been able to move on," he said.

Pendergast can't apply to the state for a certificate of rehabilitation, reinstating many of his rights, until 2015, seven years after his parole ends. He won't be able to coach football, other than as a volunteer, at least until then. But Pendergast said he's OK with that.

"My conscience is clear," he said. "I walk with my head held high. Not because I'm proud of what I did, but because I didn't let it end my life. I'll always be ashamed of what I did, but also, I'm proud of who I am."

Michael Pendergast

Age: 32

Home: Vallejo

Family: Wife Jennie, parents Bill and Denise Pendergast, brother, William, Jr.

Occupation: Law clerk.

Special interests: Coaching youth football.

Most inspired by: "My parents, both of them."

Quote: "I walk with my head held high. Not because I'm proud of what I did, but because I didn't let it end my life."

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