

From Incarceration to Inspiration: Ashley Gerdo Leads Rising Scholars Using Lived Experience

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Ashley Gerdo doesn't shy away from her past. She is open about being formerly incarcerated. It's a label that carries stigma and creates barriers for many seeking a path into higher education. But for Ashley, her lived experience is the reason she is so deeply committed to dismantling those barriers at the Rising Scholars Network, which exists to ensure that students who are currently or formerly incarcerated have access to higher education, mentorship and career pathways.

Ashley's early life was marked by hardship. After dropping out of school and running away from home to escape abuse, she struggled with addiction and spent time in jail. Ashley eventually got clean and, with support from some friends in recovery, decided to commit to rebuilding her life by returning to school while raising three young children.

It was while at MiraCosta College that she recognized a critical gap: students with experiences like hers had little support to overcome bias and find their footing in the classroom. Alongside her formerly incarcerated classmates, she advocated for change and eventually co-founded MiraCosta's Transitions Scholars program, which is part of the statewide Rising Scholars Network.

"Not everyone is like me; not everyone knows how to ask for help. That's why these programs are so valuable, because we really get to pour into the students," Gerdo said. "There's really something special about people running the programs who also come from the population, because we know the unique needs. We've been there."

Today, Ashley continues bringing that same passion in her new role as the San Diego and Imperial Counties regional coordinator for the Rising Scholars Network, supporting the 10 colleges in the region, each with a unique program serving formerly incarcerated students on campus, along with those still currently in jails, prisons or juvenile detention facilities. Her work includes helping practitioners strengthen their programs, expanding enrollment opportunities and ensuring that justice-impacted students receive the resources they need to succeed.

"I think it's important for folks like me to be able to claim our narrative and to show others what's possible," Gerdo said. "No matter what we've done in our lives — yes, we've paid the price — but most of us are going to return home. It's very important that we have these pathways and opportunities for our population."

Research shows that higher education can help change a formerly incarcerated person's trajectory, with 43% less likely to return to prison, according to a [RAND Corporation study](#) funded by the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Assistance. Those who complete degrees see even greater benefits — recidivism rates drop to 14% with an associate degree, 5.6% with a bachelor's and near zero for those who achieve a master's.

Ashley is living proof of that transformative power and what Rising Scholars can help justice-impacted students accomplish by empowering them to build brighter futures. She credits the San Diego & Imperial Regional Consortium (SDI RC) with being intentional and collaborative in supporting Rising Scholars programs across the region to create a robust local network. It's these connections and partnerships that will help the SDI RC succeed in building a strong regional network where justice-impacted students are supported not just on campus, but by a whole community committed to their success.

For more information and access to resources, visit the [Rising Scholars Network webpage](#).