

## Episode 5: Healing Through Art with Hugo Gonzalez

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:00:00] Welcome to *Our Stories Matter*. I'm Sam Lazalde.

**Susie Hess:** [00:00:32] And I'm Susie Hess.

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:00:33] *Our Stories Matter* is hosted by Trauma Informed LA and the amazing music by Torrence Brannon Reese, founding member of the music group, Street Corner Renaissance. *Our Stories Matter* at Locals Only acknowledges the Gabrielino and Tongva peoples as the traditional land caretakers of the Tovaangar, the Los Angeles basin in Southern Channel Islands. We pay our respects to the Honuukvetam, our ancestors; the 'Ahihirom, our elders; and 'eyoohiinkem, our relatives and relations past, present, and emerging.

**Susie Hess:** [00:01:12] Welcome Hugo Gonzalez to *Our Stories Matter*. I'm excited to have you on today as a good friend, and obviously as an amazing inspiration to so many people. At 17 years of age, Hugo was sentenced to 32 years in an adult prison. Hugo served 18.5 years and was commuted under governor Jerry Brown. Hugo is an artist and activist who has worked with gang intervention, rehabilitation and reentry.

He previously worked as an Initiate Justice inside organizer and a facilitator for the Success Stories program in Soledad State Prison. Hugo is committed to dismantling patriarchy through advocacy, diverse community building, and challenging societal norms. So welcome.

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:01:59] Thank you. I'm grateful to be here.

As I mentioned earlier, this is my first podcast, but at the same time, like, I'm just, I'm grateful to even listen to that, because that sounds like a dream, what was just described. So...

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:02:13] Yeah.

**Susie Hess:** [00:02:13] Can you first start off and just tell us, like maybe discuss healing through art and activism, inside and outside.

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:02:23] So, I was surrounded by a lot of people that drew that, that tattooed, and they did many different types of arts, but, and it was constantly used as like, this is my escape. But for me, it was, it was much more than that. Like I knew what my reality was. I knew that there was no escaping the fact that I was doing life in prison.

For me, art was a form of liberating myself and allowing myself to actually talk about the things that I'm going through, the things that I'm feeling, like, the depressions that I'm feeling, or the happiness that I'm feeling for whatever accomplishment. It was an ability to be able to, to say things that I can't say through words, but I was able to say through, through paint, through color, through ink. I was able to say the same thing that I wasn't willing to speak through a drawing and then people, instead of criticizing it as weakness would actually give me credit for, for doing something that's profound or deep. So the arts

before even coming out of prison was a way of being able to be myself and liberate myself for the first time in my life, you know, in a very authentic way.

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:03:35] Through these images? So were you drawing?

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:03:38] Yeah, I was drawing and painting. Once I was able to actually obtain paint, I was able to like put paint on canvas and I just took it to another level.

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:03:48] What sort of, images were you putting together?

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:03:51] It was mainly things that I was experiencing. Like, no matter what I was trying, whether it was whether it was human beings, whether it was portraits, whether it was, seems like it was, it was always something that I was going through.

And it was always something like, for example, like I never thought that I would get credit for. For, for painting a man that's sitting on in a prison sink and that's shooting up. Like, I never thought that that that would actually look artistic. But for some reason I felt like that was speaking to me. And in the moment I was able to display that in a prison gallery, like people were actually able to feel like what takes an individual to that point.

Without judgment being in the way really thinking about like, man, like I could actually think about why individuals go that route, or why is it that people self-medicate in a way where they try to cover up.

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:04:44] And see that is more like a now becomes a black and gray, tattoo story. Right? Like I always tripped out with a lot of the people that were incarcerated or the different cultures that are already in there.

It's really only, I've seen like Latino, Brown culture that tells these narratives right, with their tattoos. Did you see other other groups really picking that up?

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:05:08] No. And I'm not saying that it wasn't happening in other groups, but I, the way prison was for me was very segregated. So I was, it's very one way tunnel vision.

And I was really focusing on what the people that surrounded me were doing, as far as artistic artistry goes and they weren't shying away from the reality of things and it made it easy for me to be able to paint things that may seem politically incorrect to a point where guards would tell me, like, look, you can't have that up. Or like, look you can't paint that.

I remember doing a painting where I put CDCR and I put a California Department of Corruption and Rehabilitation. And the moment, the moment I did, I, I put that out like it was like, look, you can't do that. Like, we could actually confiscate that right now. It made me realize, like I have power even from within walls, like if someone's trying to muffle my voice, like my voice must be going somewhere.

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:06:09] Is this where it became activism?

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:06:12] The true activism came where I really started realizing how effective or how much it's needed to actually stand up for individuals that may not want to stand up for themselves and not make it about myself or make it about like, everybody that I could relate to. The moment I was able to do that, the moment I was able to hone in on that, my true fulfillment came in no matter if I was ever going to get out of prison or not. The moment that I was able to recognize that if I'm going to spend the rest of my life in prison, then, let me, let me make this community the best I could possibly make it. Let me put my art into this. The moment I started looking at life like that, doors just started opening up and it had nothing to do with me, had everything to do with what I thought I could do for others and what I felt like, what I felt that I could offer, not as a solution, but as an option in the sense of, of a way of considering a different way of looking at life.

**Susie Hess:** [00:07:13] And I think of activism too, of dismantling patriarchy while you're inside. And I would assume maybe doing a lot of the art was dismantling patriarchy in terms of how a male inside could express his feelings.

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:07:27] So I want to confess, as far as the art goes, like it just gave me an ability to use a vehicle to say what I want to say, and then sometimes getting away with it, like, eh, but when it came to activism, I noticed that like, the concentration of, or the, the people are so concentrated on, like we had to get rid of prisons or like, this is so wrong.

Whereas my mindset was more focused on look at how many people I've heard. Like what can I do to like, make a difference in the world? The question is often asked as to like, why, well, why do this or why do that? And my response is like, why not? After being able to look at a human being as a human being, like, how can I turn away and not actually do something about it?

Like how can I actually think of myself and think of a sentence after really honestly, giving true thought as to what I've done to another person. It's in those self inquiry moments that I'm actually able to really have a true way of thinking about what I want to do and what fulfills my life.

It isn't about getting rid of things. I think that that's just a byproduct of what I'm talking about. If anything, it's about being of service to others. Be of service to a point where an individual or a human being can look at me as a human being instead of a person that attempted to murder, instead of a person that violated another human being in a way that can never be repaired or can never be changed.

For me, that's what really gives me the ability to go to Sacramento and not be off putting when it comes to politicians to actually talk about like what's happening and how people are changing and how we're able to empower ourselves as individuals that were once formerly, that are formerly incarcerated and now actually are able to be in position to speak to people that have the quote unquote say, and be elaborate about it. Be effective about it instead of just talking about how unfair it is that I got a life sentence at the age of 16. Like really talk about like how we could change that, how things have changed and how my outlook in life has changed.

I'll never forget the people that I have harmed. And it's not that I haven't forgiven myself. It's just that it gives me the fuel to keep on going and being of service. And that is the answer to my why, that is my forever restitution and living in this world, in this planet as a free human being, even though it may not always feel that way as far as freedom goes. No matter where I'm at, I'm always going to, I'm always going to be of service.

**Susie Hess:** [00:10:16] I mean, you're an incredibly brave person. I, every, I tell you this a lot that I think you're a brave inside and I think you're brave outside. And I'm wondering just for the listeners, if you can talk about Success Stories and what you were doing inside, which I think, you know, goes in terms of activism and dismantling patriarchy, maybe with the hope of dismantling mass incarceration,

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:10:38] Success Stories started off in Soledad as an idea. We weren't even an actual program before we in our minds thought ourselves as a program.

And what it really related to was asking ourselves, like, what is important in your life? And how often have you sold yourself out to what you say? You hold importance in your life. And then what it comes down to is having these definitions of what we see as a man. And a lot of times these definitions revolve on, I have a lot of women, so I'm a man. I have dominance.

I like, I'll beat you up. Or I'm willing to go that far in a violent way to prove myself as a man. Or, like I have money. So that makes me a man. So all these different things, we just started pointing out and really started asking, like, why, like, why are you willing to bump your head so far into that wall to prove yourself as a man, even if the end result would be doing life in prison.

Well, we really started realizing is that many individuals, once we had the space to really talk in an authentic way is that many of us were raised by mothers and grandmothers and the whole definition of a man of being supportive, loving, like helping out, like, what we really realize is that the greatest men that we've ever known were our mothers and our grandmothers.

And if, and if that is, is what is a fact then being a man has nothing to do with living in life. Being a human being is what really matters. And being able to see people as such. What we do in Success Stories is we point out that. We point out like, look, we're not talking. We're not, we're not even telling you how to live or how to think, we're just, we're just opening up the space to really question, like, why is it that you think that way?

Why is it that you do what you do? Why is it that you use phrases like, that's just the way it is, as if you have no other option. Why is it that we use phrases as, it is what it is, as if there is no other option? Like when there's been an option the whole time. It's an amazing thing to be able to not only start off in Soledad, but to come out and now work for Success Stories and realize that we're expanding in so many different spaces, juvenile halls, jails schools, and we're able to like really talk about the distorted way of believing in the story, the way of like really defining things and then really getting to the essence of it.

I want to point out that many times for myself, because I'm speaking for myself more than anything else, I didn't even know that these things mattered. And when I say these things, I

mean, like my upbringing of a man doesn't cry. I didn't know that I was suppressing my most deepest emotions. I didn't know that I was suppressing my most authentic way of being when I'm supposed to act or just cover it up or just like suppress that. I didn't know that that will later on affect me to where I wouldn't be able to express or explain why it is that I'm acting so violently or why it is that I feel that I need a plan B when it comes over with relationship or a plan C or plan D, why it is that I feel that I need to chase money.

And even though this money really isn't even equating to like serious money, like why it is that is that it's making me feel so independent in that independence is making me feel, quote, unquote, like a man.

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:14:10] In uncovering all of these masks for yourself, I'm sure in the groups that you ran while you, while you were doing time, how would you guys cope? How would you sort through the mess now that you guys uncovered?

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:14:24] I would say one of the main things that has helped me out is being able to communicate with them, that person about what I'm going through. And these are, these are conversations that I honestly felt that I could never have with anybody at one point or another, because I felt like it was just a sign of weakness to be able to talk about like, man, like, you know what, I really don't feel too comfortable about the fact that I had to do something that I don't want to do.

Like why can't I just really honestly go with, I don't want to do it and not do it. Why do I have to live a life of being pressured into doing something and then giving myself no choice, even though there's always a choice. Being able to talk to individuals that honestly have my best interest at heart has helped me be myself in a very authentic way, has helped me realize that no matter what, I always have a choice.

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:15:16] How much of that was these other people and how much of it was really just that self-reflection, just your light bulb going off?

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:15:23] You know, I would say it was a combination of both. And, you know, I mean, if I were to speak percentage wise, I'm not good in that, it changes from day to day. I would say sometimes the uplifting of, of an individual that cares about me would be 90%.

And there's other times that my determination becomes 90% as far as like what I know needs to be done, because it's the right thing to do. And then realizing like, look now that I know I have to go off of what I know, instead of just saying, I know, I know. And then doing the complete opposite. So, I mean, that varies from, from situation to situation because I can't take credit.

I can't take full credit for where I'm at today. Like I'm sitting before you guys right now and I'm in awe. Like I said, my first podcast, but at the same time, like I know that this isn't a coincidence. Like I'm surrounded by innovative people that really inspire me and I can't ignore the fact that no matter how I'm feeling about life, like, I'm where I need to be right now.

**Susie Hess:** [00:16:26] I mean, just your reflection, I think, is incredibly brave. And I think about self-reflecting when you're inside. And then when you said, you know, like boys don't cry as a stereotype and in tears we have cortisol. That's the stress hormone that releases pain and fear and stress.

So then you think, boys don't cry and then where does all that stress go? And then I, I only know you today. I didn't know you, you know, back in the day. So I just think you're incredibly brave to be able to be reflective and expressive inside. And dismantling.

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:17:00] Once we came up with the curriculum, we were thinking like, so how are we going to deliver this in prison?

Like, how are we going to deliver this without it sounding corny, without it sounding like, this is off putting, like, I do not want to talk about my emotions or feelings. And the main thing we thought of was we have to set a tone and the way we set the tone is with our stories.

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:17:20] Yeah.

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:17:21] With our, our ability of being vulnerable.

And instead of looking at vulnerability as a weakness, for the first time in my life, I was able to look at vulnerability as a strength.

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:17:31] Just was owning it.

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:17:32] Yeah, like in the same way that people are into an oldie because it just sounds right, in the same way that people are into poems, in the same way that people choke up over a movie. That's that connection of vulnerability. In that same way, I figured if I could come up with my deepest story and actually have the guts to share it with everyone else, then maybe just maybe like, it would create a trajectory to where at least some people in the room would do the same. And that's exactly what happened.

We opened up the space to where people were able to be themselves and talk about things that they never talked about, whether it was abuse, sexual abuse, whether it was just being neglected, regardless of what it was. It opened up the space to really talk about the things that we're always questioning in our lives and that we buried.

The things that really honestly had the, had the answer to the why, why do we, why did I ever do that? Why did I ever act that way? Like why did I ever feel the need to do the harsh things that I did in life? Because everybody's been asking, but I don't have the answer, but the truth is we always had the answer. We were just ignoring it. We were just covering it up because it was that painful.

**Susie Hess:** [00:18:50] And I think hurt people, hurt people, right? So with, you know, everything that you're doing in terms of art, as activism and activism as art, how do you see all of this as political?

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:19:01] Off the top when I think of politics, I think of people that just basically lie or that do or say whatever they have to say, what it took to get what they want.

But now that I think about it, like just the fact that so many formerly incarcerated individuals are able to go to Sacramento and actually be heard, like that's a political movement in itself. The fact that I see people that I was in prison with, with titles and with the power that they have to change laws to me, it just makes me smile to know that we've reached a point, not to say that there isn't, that we're at the top, but we've reached a point where we really are heard and change is happening. Like it's happening and maybe happening slow, but it's happening to a point where like, it can't be ignored anymore. There's no doubt that it's a revolution that we're able to sit here and whether you're formerly incarcerated or not, everyone is looked at as a powerful individual that has something to say something worth saying, and it's heard.

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:20:03] I mean, there's movement. This revolution, how do you see it as a being community healing?

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:20:10] I would say that for so long, like, it's just been about how unfair laws are or how we should change laws because people are going to prison for so long for things that they've done or may have not done. And now I believe that the healing happens because it's more focused on everyone instead of just one person.

Like it's actually focused on victims. Like you have us walking into rooms of people that have been hurt by us and we're actually able to communicate. And we're actually able to ask for forgiveness in a genuine way. And for me, like, that's the deepest thing. For me to be able to be of service no matter what, that's probably the deepest thing I've ever done, because for so long, I've been so selfish.

And for the first time in my life, I'm able to, I'm able to look at the other side and understand that I would be hurt if I was on the other side. Just, it compels me to walk to the other side and connect. Not in a way of labeling myself a victim of a system, but in a way of being able to just embrace and being able to take responsibility for the things that I've done and not ignore the fact that, that we're all connected.

And, and that's where the true healing begins, where a mother could actually look at me, teared up, and know that her son will never come back to this planet. And at the same time embraced me, like with open arms.

**Susie Hess:** [00:21:40] I mean, it's so powerful how you are reflecting and expressing yourself. And I'm curious how, what was that switch? Because I think people who are listening too are going to be inspired and wonder, how did that happen? Like, how did you get here?

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:21:54] In 2012, there was a possibility that I had testicular cancer. So. They, I went through the test and then I went upstairs to a prison clinic and that clinic that I was at had actual cancer patients. And I was just waiting for my results. And as I was waiting for my results, I saw three guys that I knew from the yard and I hadn't seen them in about a year or so, and I never questioned where they were at or anything like that because at that point in time, it really didn't matter to me where they were at.

I just knew that they were gone, but I didn't even think about the fact that they were gone up until I saw them in that waiting room. And they told me that they had stage four cancer. And as I'm waiting for my results, I started really realizing like, man, I never even questioned where they were at. I got my results and they were negative.

But as I was walking away, I remember this older man, Junior, stage four cancer. He was very feeble by that time. I was like, do you give visits at all? And he was like, we can't get visits. We have to stay here. And I didn't realize at that time, but I started, I started visiting those guys and I, and in the mix of that, there was like many different people like, hey, when you're, when you're medically ill, when you have cancer, they don't separate you by a sensitive needs or general population, sensitive needs being like protective custody. Like everyone's a mix

That was the first time in my life that it really didn't even matter to me who was what or what was what. Around that time, it was Christmas. I remember purchasing like 50 honey buns. I purchased some sodas and I asked the guard if I could get permission to go up there and give everybody a soda and a honey bun, and he allowed me to do that.

And it just became a ritual thing where every Sunday, I would go up there and take something to them. And that was the first time in my life that I could actually pinpoint doing something that was, it's like selfless, that it wasn't for me, it was for someone else. And I'm not saying that I wouldn't get anything out of it because I felt good to do something good.

But at the same time, at that point in time, it really was just me having the experience of possibly having cancer, not having cancer and then walking away from it and thinking to myself, like, man, I just can't forget what just happened.

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:24:21] So this is while you were incarcerated?

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:24:24] Yeah, this is while I was in Soledad.

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:24:27] And then you made it a thing to go, visit...

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:24:29] Every Sunday til I got released. Every Sunday till I got released for like a whole year. And nobody knew that to this very day I'm saying in this podcast. This is the first time I actually talk about this. That's like something that really isn't, that's frowned upon.

**Susie Hess:** [00:24:48] What's frowned upon?

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:24:49] Well, just accommodating to an individual that may be considered like, no good. So you're no longer even a good human being, like even in the, in, even in the crime world of being a bad person, like now you're extremely bad to a point where I will label you, no good.

**Susie Hess:** [00:25:08] Wait, because they've been diagnosed with cancer?

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:25:12] No, no. So, so what he's saying is normally there there's these hard lines that are gone. I mean, even by just the prison infrastructure at that point, right? Like

they have to separate these, these inmates. There's general population, there's a protective custody. In this particular unit or ward, yeah, the medical unit where he had gone those lines were blurred because now it's just the sick inmates from each of these yards.

**Susie Hess:** [00:25:43] So you're crossing over whether it's GP or a PC?

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:25:46] Yeah

**Susie Hess:** [00:25:46] Like it's just all

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:25:47] You're all together.

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:25:48] It's a mixture because now, by law that your medical issue, surpasses or...

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:25:56] It supersedes

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:25:57] It supersedes

**Susie Hess:** [00:25:57] Segregation.

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:25:58] Yes.

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:25:59] Yes

**Susie Hess:** [00:26:00] Oh, okay. So how. Well, that again goes back to bravery. How were you able to cross those boundaries and survive inside?

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:26:10] I can't even take credit for that because no one knows till right now.

**Susie Hess:** [00:26:13] No one knows. So you were sneaking,

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:26:15] But I did that simply because I actually thought I was going to like, plainly speaking I thought I was going to lose my nuts.

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:26:22] Yeah.

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:26:23] I thought I had cancer. And then it goes to the possibility that it spread to my abdomen. Like, I, I was like hella stressed out, like more stress than doing life from prison.

I actually thought I was going to die in prison. So like sitting there waiting for my results and then getting my results as negative. I could not take that as a good thing, as I was walking away realizing that this man and that man and that man are stage four and I knew them from the yard and now...

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:26:51] They're not going no where.

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:26:52] They're going to die and they did die before I went home.

All the individuals that I'm talking about that I was close to, died.

**Susie Hess:** [00:27:00] Oh, wow.

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:27:02] They didn't go home. They didn't see freedom. They asked for a pardon. They asked for commutation. I got it. They didn't. I didn't feel like I deserved it at that time, but I got it. And to be honest with you to this very day, I won't, I won't forget the people that I met in prison that have made a strong impact in my life.

Like I grew up in prison, but when I say that, I mean, it genuinely, like I grew up in prison, whether it was the heroin addict or whether it was the dude that felt, he knew the whole dictionary. Like I was taught everything that I know through the individuals that I met in prison, like I was nurtured and I was like fed and I was given everything that I know now through prison walls.

**Susie Hess:** [00:27:52] Well, and we are every relationship we've ever met. So that makes so much sense. So do you think, what do you think is your, why in terms of the art and activism inside and out, like, what is your, why, what is your heartbeat?

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:28:09] My why is just recognizing that there's many times that I feel like I shouldn't even have been out of here.

So when I think of being out here, there is no other option but to be of service to others. And the moment that I slip and start making it about myself is the moment that I start forgetting about the blessings that I've had, the miracles that I've had, the miracles that I've witnessed from that negative test to being able to have a governor commute, my sentence out of like thousands of names that were given to him.

Like realizing the percentage. I remember, I remember that day that he commuted my sentence and I remember the captain pulling out the calculator and his computer and actually like doing the math and the math was like way out and knowing that I was selected. It's just amazing. I'll never forget that.

And I can't sell the world short for me being of service for that. More importantly, like I want to just straight out say like that's where my true fulfillment comes from. It doesn't, it doesn't come from me just being self absorbed or being selfish, even though I still have moments of that.

**Susie Hess:** [00:29:23] Yeah. And you know, Sam, I remember you talking about this in terms of like the survivor's guilt and then all the work that you do out here.

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:29:32] Yeah. I mean, and in a lot of ways, feeling indebted, indebted to my community, to, to the families in it, right. To, to my people, to society, but then also, you know maybe that igniting the flame to want to do something about it, but then, you know, like, like Hugo being able to own that as, as this is just what I do, it's just who I am.

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:30:00] Yeah. The why almost becomes a, why not? Like the, why becomes like, why even question it, that we should all be doing this. Like if you see something happening, like why, like why is it that we take certain things personal. And when

it comes to other people, like we won't take it as personal. Though we can pass by the freeway and see a truck flipped over and we would just keep on going.

But yet if that truck was with our loved ones, like there is no way that we would just keep on going. Why can't we take everything in a way where, like it affects us that way. And I'm not saying, I'm not saying I'm perfect at it. All I'm saying, is that just thinking of life that way reminds me that not only am I blessed to be out here, but at the same time, like I do have a job to do, like, everything happened for a reason and I gotta, I gotta do my part.

Cause I was a question mark. That meaning, like, I did not know if I was ever going to see this world again.

**Susie Hess:** [00:31:07] It's interesting cause when you and I talk and what we're talking just about stuff, that's like hard, you'll always end the sentence and say, but I'm free.

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:31:16] Hell yeah. Hell yeah.

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:31:19] That sounds good, right?

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:31:20] Hell yeah. Sounds good.

That means that no matter what happens, no matter how devastating shit, maybe it's like, wait a minute. I'm free. And it just like, it does something to the soul. It does something to the psyche of feeling like trapped or feeling overwhelmed or feeling like, Oh my God, I'm drowning by the situation. Like, hell no, wait a minute. You're free.

I'm free. I'm grateful for that.

**Susie Hess:** [00:31:55] You know, if there's family members of youth or individuals who are inside and they're listening, what, like what can you tell them in terms of hope, whether it's hope, maybe for the families, for the youth, for individuals who are inside, because hope does decolonize. And it just seems like there was something in you that you kept going, you never gave up inside.

Even thinking that I'm never going to get out.

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:32:23] The one thing I would say is like communication and connection is key. So like when asking your child or when asking a loved one, like, how are you doing? Like, how's your day? Like, how are you? Like, these are questions that sometimes I figure are like left out.

I remember having kids walk into the prison just to go through a tour. And they would open up in less than an hour. And the few questions that we would ask is like, how are you doing, how's life? And they would open up as if they've never been asked that question. And then I realized after like my 10th tour, like they haven't been asked that question. Parents, adult are so caught up with life, caught up with the responsibilities of paying a bill.

That they completely forget about the fact that they have a child or a loved one that's looking up to them and waiting for their feedback. But more importantly are waiting for the

question of like, how are you doing, how's life? What do you like to do? Simply just checking in and then the conversation begins.

**Susie Hess:** [00:33:47] If folks wanted to maybe either get involved with Success Stories or if they wanted to just sort of start getting involved in terms of, you know, dismantling mass incarceration, supporting youth, you know, what are some recommendations that you have?

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:34:09] They can email me at [hugo@successstoriesprogram.org](mailto:hugo@successstoriesprogram.org), but more than anything else, I would say question everything.

We have a tendency as human beings to build up judgment on things that are happening. But before that even happens, which is almost human instinct, but before that even happens, just like truly honestly question it, because when we question things, we begin to get understanding and it's through that understanding that we have the option to have compassion. And it's through that compassion that we have the ability to come up with real solutions instead of bandages to things that we may label problems.

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:34:47] Thank you, bro. Thank you for coming out and doing this interview with us.

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:34:51] Alright, thank you for having me. Seriously, appreciate this, surrounded by greatness. So believe me, when I say it, I'm humbled.

**Susie Hess:** [00:34:59] You are inspiring. I know you're humble. And you, you are so inspiring, whether it's for youth, for families, you know, just. Hope. I mean, I think you give hope to so many people, which is what hearing all of this, and especially what you were doing on Sundays. I mean, just hope in terms of survival and resilience.

I mean, just that internal, like drive to keep going is just pretty powerful that I see in you. And I'm sure everyone will be seeing in you.

**Hugo Gonzalez:** [00:35:33] And I'm free.

**Sam Lazalde:** [00:35:35] *Our Stories Matter* is brought to you by Trauma Informed LA, whose mission is to foster resilient communities that promote healing and wellbeing through collaboration, education, and community engagement. Check us out on Facebook and Instagram at Trauma Informed LA.

And our website, [traumainformedla.org](http://traumainformedla.org). Please give us five stars on iTunes so more folks can have access, and donate to [traumainformedla.org](http://traumainformedla.org) so we can keep recording and healing through our storytelling episodes.