Inspirational Transfer Student
Name: Mathew Plinck
DOB: May 6, 1984
Age: 29

You can’t judge a book by its cover.

Take a look at former gang member, Mathew Plinck. Despite spending 12 years in and out of prison, and being on parole for his whole adult life, he will be going to U.C. Berkeley to pursue a Bachelor’s degree in Psychology.

Matthew grew up in various places across Los Angeles with his family. When his parents divorced, his life started to spiral out of control. At age 13 he joined a gang and by age 15 his mother had released him to the State of California’s Child Welfare System.

On his life in a gang, Matthew says:

“…when I joined my neighborhood [gang], the thing that attracted me to it was not the money, but it was the loyalty, the love, the respect, the family orientation that you feel, the unwritten gangster code of ethics – the ideology behind gangbanging: no telling, no disrespect, no females over your homeboys. I really adhered to all of this stuff. I loved everything about it. It was so cool to me.”

For some, gang banging might have been the end of their life, but Matthew survived.

“…the thing that changed me is that over time, I saw that it [gang life] was false. People tell on people. I saw my home boys shooting at each other over women and over drugs. I saw all these things and I said, ‘where’s the love in that?’ I started realizing that if I would have done life in jail, I would’ve not been mad, I would have been happy because I would be doing it for my hood, but when I saw that I was doing it wasn’t for what I thought it was, I thought, ‘Why am I wasting my time?’”

He left the gang at age 26.

“Getting out hasn’t been all peaches and cream. It’s not really them – it’s me because I am still trying to detach myself from that lifestyle,” said Matthew. Before enrolling at Southwest in 2011, he spent one year in a homeless shelter in Bell Gardens and later, another year living in transitional housing in South Los Angeles before he was able to move into his own apartment.

Matthew credits “a lot of people” at Southwest who helped him through school,
including staff in EOP&S, TRIO Scholars, Student Services and Financial Aid.

“Everyone that I’ve talked to [at Southwest] has just been so helpful to me – everybody. Ortega, Dr. Salas, Ms. Williams, Chauncine, Dean Cobian, Bob – are very good people. Ms. G in the Financial Aid office, and Ms. Hall. There’s been a whole bunch of people who have contributed to me to succeed. By no means has it just been myself.”

“This is good place to start. For me, I had really low confidence. I didn’t believe in myself. It really helps to know that you are cared for, and told that I could do it,” he continued.

Studying psychology at Southwest has had a major impact on Matthew.

“The best thing that has been able to help me is, number one, being able to understanding things from other people’s perspective. I think that has been such a valuable tool that I have been able to use. As well as questioning myself and not always thinking that I am right…It’s [psychology] been a great help for me to sit and think prior to me doing something, and think about the consequences and outcomes and really put forth some thought and effort before I make decisions,” said Matthew.”

He continued to say:

“College filled that void that I’ve been looking for my whole life. I think more so than college – people [at Southwest] did. To me, it's amazing how you can have people you don’t even know, and they’re not your family, but they exude love and care toward you. That filled my void.”

Now that he is on his way to U.C. Berkeley, Matthew is more excited about his future studies in psychology.

“I want to major in psychology, but I want to find a way to get inside of the business program and get my masters in healthcare management or business management, preferably in health care because I want to open a clinic,” said Matthew. “My reasoning behind [opening] a clinic is my passion for psychology. I want to help individuals understand what they are going through.”

Of some of his proudest moments, Matthew says: “I am most proud of my success in education, and the fact that my family is coming around more. I don't have to watch my mom cry in sadness anymore.”

Today, Matthew has a new life. He was discharged from his parole in April 2013, and looks forward to helping others.

His tough-love advice to other young people struggling in gangbanging:

“Never give up. If you try hard enough to make it – you will make it. You’re gonna have to work for it and stop being lazy and afraid. You can't wallow in self-pity. Start to know who you are. Never give up.”