

## Valley business offers second chances



Jason Carter says he was able to turn his life around because of his job as a commodities manager at Electronic Recyclers in Fresno. The company employs dozens of ex-convicts who are trying to change their lives and be productive citizens.

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By [Catherine Mylinh](#)

Jason Carter walks with his head held high these days. There was a time when the ink on his body was a source of regret; a painful reminder of the bad decisions he has made in the past, of what could have been a lifetime of closed doors.

"I had just gotten out of prison. I was trying to find a job but a lot of people wouldn't give me a job because of my background, you know, being incarcerated, having tattoos," Carter said.

Nearly two years ago, while the young man was trying to get his life back on track and looking for work he went from one fruitless interview to the next. His hope was fading and a return to a life of crime seemed inevitable. But then it all turned around.

Carter was able to land a job at Electronic Recyclers in Fresno; he worked his way up and was eventually promoted to management. "They give me a lot of responsibilities. They trust me 100%," he said, a hint of shy pride in his eye.

Next to Carter stands his beaming colleague; Mandingo Cain is yet another walking miracle.

"My life before [I joined the company] was chaos. I was in and out of the juvenile system, a life of crime, stuff like that," Cain said.

These two men have John Shegarian to thank. The Electronic Recyclers CEO hires dozens of ex-convicts and former gang members to work at his plant.

"Just like all the materials are recycled here, we recycle lives too," Shegarian boasted. The Valley business man currently has 50 ex-convicts, including 25 former gang members, employed at Electronic Recyclers.

It's a concept that's central to Fresno Mayor Alan Autry's "Gang Prevention Initiative": give people a second chance.

Since its August 2006 inception, nearly 2,000 people have been referred to the initiative. Nearly 600 people have received services such as tattoo removal, job training, substance abuse and mental health counseling and education services. And local businesses like Electronic Recyclers are imperative in keeping the program going.

"To have prevention and intervention and oppression is inextricably connected if we're going to fight crime effectively," Autry said during a news conference at the ER warehouse Tuesday morning.

And Fresno's top cop agrees. "There are a lot of individuals who want to turn their lives around. They have a sincere desire to be productive. They just need an opportunity," said Police Chief Jerry Dyer as he thanked Shegerian.

So Tuesday, to spur more of these opportunities and to help the program succeed, Shegerian donated \$25,000 to the city's gang prevention program along with a challenge to other business owners.

"Everyone can serve. Every business owner can be part of this story if they just open their hearts and their doors to one person," Shegerian said.

The rewards, he says, greatly outweigh the risks. Shegerian considers many of his workers part of his family. His employees, in turn, say they never hesitate to go the extra mile for their boss.

"My relationship with John goes beyond electronic recyclables. He trusts me with a lot considering where I came from. I was able to start my life over. I can't break that trust," Cain said.

"My life has changed dramatically [since I came here]. I can support myself. I have my own place, I can pay my own bills, I can take care of my daughter," Carter said.

"If we can just inspire other business owners to just hire one person [who's trying to turn their life around], just one, we can change the Valley forever," Shegerian reiterated.

Because just like the electronic parts at the warehouse, Shegerian says these men are also getting another crack at life.