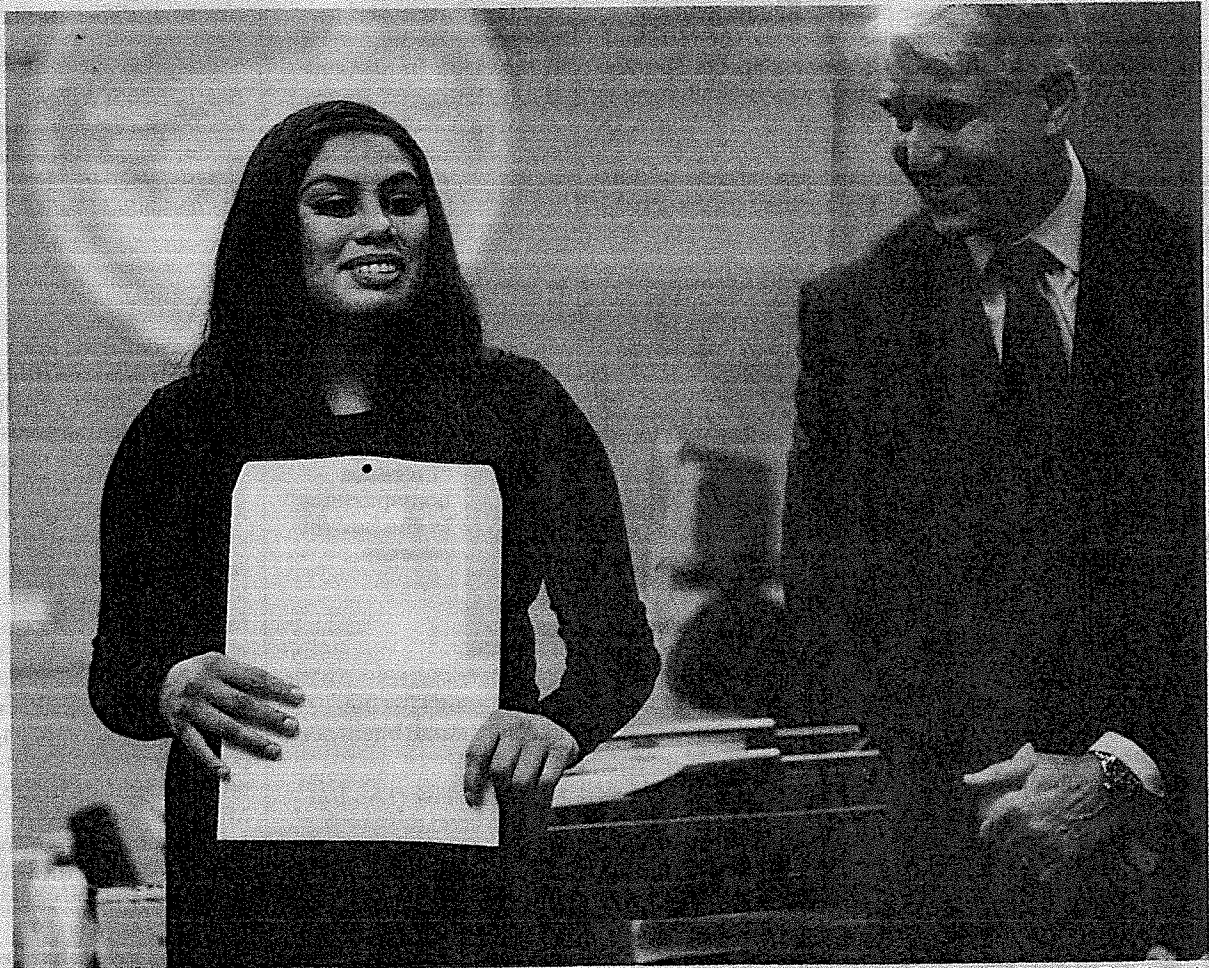


# Bay Area

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Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

**Gabrielle receives a Young Adult Court graduation certificate from District Attorney George Gascón.**

## Graduating in a S.F. courtroom

# Program propels former youthful offenders

By Lauren Hernandez

Gabrielle ran her fingertips across the base of the growing belly poking from her fitted black, long-sleeved dress. When the 23-year-old first entered Judge Bruce Chan's courtroom in San Francisco two years ago, she was gaunt and disheveled from using crystal meth and sleeping on sidewalks, between business doorways and in street tents, with her ex-boyfriend. She was 18 years old when she left her Southern California hometown of Montclair to move to the city, and life quickly spiraled out of control.

Last week, Gabrielle sat in the jury box of Department 24 at the San Francisco Hall of Justice along with 13 other young adults and clutched a graduation program between her fingers. After two years

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— Gabrielle

of feeling plagued by uncertainty over two potential felony convictions, Gabrielle heard the words she was longing to hear: "The matter has been resolved."

Gabrielle was joined by other graduates of the Young Adult Court, a collaborative program in the San Francisco County Superior Court intended to provide defendants facing mostly nonviolent felonies the opportunity to get their charges reduced or dismissed. Officials have said the program helps participants build skills to prevent recidivism.

By going through the program, Gabrielle's two felony counts of assault with a deadly weapon likely to produce great bodily injury were reduced to misdemeanors. She will be on probation for a year but won't be required to report to a

*Graduating continues on D3*

## Ex-offender graduates

*Graduating from page D1*

probation officer.

"I regret the mistakes I made, but I can't say I regret being in this program," Gabrielle said. "I'm not the same person I was before."

The program was founded on studies suggesting that the prefrontal cortex of the brain in young adults is not fully developed, causing some people to commit crimes without fully processing the gravity of their actions.

With specialized counseling, anger management classes and behavioral therapy, more than 50 graduates of the program have moved on to find stable housing, jobs and not re-offend since the program's inception in 2015, according to court officials.

San Francisco District Attorney George Gascón cradled stacks of commemorative diplomas and shook the hands of each graduate,

switching from English to Spanish to wish them "good luck" and "buena suerte."

"When I look into their faces, I see a reflection," Gascón said. "I know how it is to grow up in a poor, immigrant neighborhood. There are so many odds against you. There is a theoretical piece to this program, because traditional methods don't work. But there is an emotional, personal piece to it that has to do with my very own upbringing."

Gascón, who grew up in a working-class community in Cuba, said he helped spearhead the program to stop the cycle of incarceration among young adults in critical transitional points in their lives.

"The reality is that incarcerating people is a very limited answer, and an answer that only provides relief for a short period of time," he said.

Nearly all program participants have been subjected to trauma that includes domestic violence, absent parents, poverty and violence, said Judge Bruce Chan, who decided to forgo his judicial robes in court for graduation day.

"The government is not a substitute for stability, but you can't just punish them for their decisions," he said. "The court aspect is about holding them accountable, but we still have to invest in the community."

Gabrielle grew up in a home where her father left when she was 5 and her mother used drugs. She later mourned the death of her father when she was 11. As a teenager, she decided to give her first child up for adoption. She still has communication with her son, now 4 years old.

When she and her ex-boyfriend arrived in the city, they planned

# in a S.F. courtroom

to find jobs and build a life together, but they quickly found themselves sleeping on cold concrete and using drugs under building awnings.

"Being a woman on the streets? I was scared for my life," Gabrielle said. "When I was in jail, I had nothing else to think about but what was going on in my life. I was able to get some clarity about my problems."

Lisa Lightman, the director of the Collaborative Court for the San Francisco Superior Court, said the program diverts clients from the traditional court case management to better align with their brain development and individual experiences.

A team comprising a public defender, case manager and probation officials helps participants navigate through each phase, including job readiness exercises and landing actual jobs. Clients can end up

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feeling grounded by taking behavioral therapy as they're pushed to get involved in the community.

Depending on each person's progress and willingness to attend sessions, participants can complete the program in a year or less.

Over the course of Gabrielle's roughly yearlong program, she kicked her drug addiction and secured two jobs working for Larkin Street Youth Services and Blazing Saddles Bike Rentals and Tours.

On the day of her graduation, she thumbed through three children's books given to her as gifts from Chan's mini-library in his judicial office. The

books were donated by public defenders, probation and court staff.

As she nears her daughter's birth, expected around Oct. 12, Gabrielle said she's already working to secure housing in Southern California with the help of her grandfather. She said she wants to pursue a career in cosmetology.

"I'm going to be a mother to a beautiful baby girl, and I'm going to show her to respect herself, to love herself and to know her worth," Gabrielle said with tears in her eyes. "I'm a blessed person who had an opportunity to change my life, and I'm going to do everything to make sure my kids have a better life than I did."

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*Lauren Hernandez is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: [lauren.hernandez@sfbay.com](mailto:lauren.hernandez@sfbay.com) Twitter: @LaurenPorFavor*