Construction program gives troubled youths a direction

SUNLAND:
Project teaches juvenile offenders skills to build path to success
By Chris Meritino

As he walks in the nearly completed $174 million Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center, Randy Barajas talks about the dramatic change of direction in his life.

"I'm doing something better than what I was doing before," he said as he sat at the building's central controls, working on the security system.

What Barajas was doing before got him sent to the old Juvenile Justice Center, just down Fairmont Drive in Sunland. Eventually, it led to Camp Wilmot Sweeney, an unlocked, 24-hour residential program where teen screws out their court sentences for misdemeanor crimes.

It was at the camp that the 18-year-old Oakland resident became involved in the Cornerstone Foundation for Educational Advancement project, a collaboration See YOUTHS, Page 28

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between the county's Office of Education and Wayne Perry and his San Francisco construction management firm Conserview Construction Inc. The project allows teens at the camp interested in construction and building to interview with Perry for a chance at a rigorous 12-week program.

Perry began the foundation 20 years ago. He wanted to create a program where kids could learn about a trade that interested them, something many struggle to find. Perry knew when he was 16 that he wanted to be an architect but had no idea how to break into the field.

"I wanted to do something to give back to the community," Perry said.

Three and a half years ago, Perry and his company teamed with the county to teach minors in the juvenile justice system the principles of design and construction.

Classes and workshops meet four days a week for two to four hours at a time. The dedication and time required is too much for some, as only about half of the kids entered the 11-student program finish it.

Barajas is one of three Cornerstone graduates working on the new juvenile jail— all having residential experience or the old jail, all now learning skills to help build a career.

"I think this all has made me career-driven," said Adeline Soto, 19, of Fremont, a Cornerstone graduate and now the only office engineer. "I think it's helped shape my life and shows me what's out there. It's helped me grow.

Jim Monier, senior construction manager for Vitas Construction, which is managing the new jail site, said the most impressive thing he has seen from the program and its graduates working at the site is how much they've learned from the program and how much they can handle on the job.

"They're not here getting other people's coffee," Muster said. "They are doing real work and have real responsibility, and they understand that.

Toni Adams, director of student programs and services for the county's office of education, said what these young ones can do shouldn't come as a shock to anyone. "As one of them once told me, "Just because we did get here, it doesn't mean we are stupid."

Adams said. "That's very true.

Julio Gonzales, 20, of Hayward has been working at the juvenile facility site for nearly two years. When he entered the juvenile justice system, he said he wasn't sure what he wanted to do. Since then, he has become a union carpenter.

"I really didn't want to do nothing," Gonzales said. "I just wanted to chill. But they say you gotta work.

That's what these three will do at the site for at least a little while longer, before the center is set to open in April.