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GETTING INTO WORKPLACE JOB- TRAINING PROGRAM HELPS TURN YOUNG LIVES AROUND

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Lorena Chavez listens to Good Guys recruiter Charles Smith during a job fair held by Mexican-American Community Services Agency. (color)

Peter Quintero got into a gang when he was a 14-year-old freshman at Andrew Hill High School because it offered friendship at a time his family was breaking up with a divorce.

"We'd steal a lot and break into houses and stores," he said. "I got arrested a couple of times and went to juvenile hall and then to the boys' ranch and various boys' homes. I ran away several times."

Now 18 and a father, Quintero is out of the gang and trying to stay out of trouble. He is looking forward to his next paycheck so he can buy baby clothes for his year-old daughter.

The youth credits his turn-around from gang member to responsible father to the Youth Employment Program offered by Mexican-American Community Services Agency (MACSA) in San Jose.

The MACSA program at its center on Jackson Street in San Jose is one of a dozen of its kind in Santa Clara County funded by the nation's major job training program for the unskilled and unemployed – the Jobs Training Participation Act.

The three-week training programs teach such basic skills as where to find a job, how to write a resume and fill out a job application and how to act during a job interview. They also stress the importance of attitude, personal appearance, interpersonal relationships and being punctual on the job.

The program works in cooperation with employers, who provide actual job training while the trainees' pay is reimbursed by the JTPA. Jobs for the trainees, age 16 to 21, have ranged from manufacturing to printing and retail sales.

JTPA has been criticized nationally because it reaches only a tiny fraction of those who need job training or retraining, for its one-third dropout rate, and for sending some 80 percent of those it does graduate into jobs paying less than \$5 an hour.

JTPA funding has been frozen nationally, pending a study ordered by Labor Secretary Robert Reich.

But on a local level, there are many success stories, JTPA officials say.

Ambition to succeed

Ex-gang member Quintero is one of them. As a stock clerk for Sears in Eastridge Shopping Center, Quintero is among the low-paid multitudes. But he has ambition now and a newly acquired attitude change and work ethic that could lead to a future of relative prosperity. "If it wasn't for them (the folks at the MACSA program) I don't think I'd be doing what I'm doing now," Quintero said in an interview on the MACSA patio.

The teen-ager said he gets up daily at 4:30 a.m. and catches a 5:30 a.m. bus to his job. He starts working at 6 a.m. After his day's work he goes to San Jose State University, where he does volunteer work for KSJS radio and is enrolled in a course on radio, TV and film.

Focus on future

Quintero said he got out of his gang and into the training program because he "got tired of being locked up. I didn't see any future for me. But if I keep on the path I'm going now there is a future. Nobody will throw me off this time. The only thing I really worry about now is my daughter. I don't want her to go through the things I did."

Some of the program graduates stumble after initial successes, according to Aurora Cepeda, project coordinator of the MACSA program, which is funded also in part by the city of San Jose's neighborhood services office.

One of the MACSA star graduates was doing well on his job until he made a big mistake. He had broken up with the mother of his child and wanted to scare her so he drove by and fired at her house with a gun, Cepeda said. No one was hurt, but the young man is now in Folsom State Prison.

'Good kid, bad choice'

"You have to find a way to get out of it (the ways of the gang)," she said. "But he just gave in to it. He's one of the kids who made a bad choice. Basically, he's a good kid."

Cepeda, who has several years' experience dealing with young toughs, writes back to the prisoner and keeps in touch with others who fail the training program.

"They need to know there's someone out there who cares," she said. "Some will come back even if they fail the program – embarrassed a little, but they'll come back. Maybe they weren't ready for it, and some will try again."

Cepeda sometimes becomes like family to the trainees. She was a big sister to one, Tamara Arana, 18, and became the godmother of Arana's baby.

Earlier mistake

The young mother completed the MACSA/JPTA training and got a job, but co-workers had trouble accepting her, she said, partly because of what she calls an earlier mistake – several tattoos.

Also a former gang member, Arana is hoping to find an agency or volunteer group that will pay for the expensive removal of the tattoos. "I regret them," she said. People think bad things about you. When I go for interviews to get a job I always have to cover them."

Like Quintero, Arana hopes to go to college to become a police officer. Appreciative employer

Bill Scales, owner of E-FAB of Santa Clara, who has hired several graduates said the MACSA program "mothers them along and give them the feeling they're important. They provide some institutional interface that is more positive than maybe what they're getting out of school."

One thing he counts on from MACSA, said Scales, "is they screen people and are fairly careful to make sure no drugs are involved and stuff like that. That's a big concern of mine."

The trainees from MACSA "are doing much better than kids who have had no direction," he said.

Asian Americans for Community Involvement runs a similar program, and like all 12 JTPA agencies, it is designed to fit the specific needs of the community it serves. In AACI's case, that means teaching English as a second language and how to read a bus schedule in addition to the usual job-seeking skills.

Refugees get training

Most of the 20 young Asians in the AACI program are refugees from Vietnam, said Ted Porciuncula, program director.

"They've been here three months to one year and spent months in refugee camps," he said. "Since many are over 18, schools will not accept them."

The AACI program "tries to motivate them to go to college," he said.

"We bring in role models, Vietnamese doctors, computer programmers and even a U.S. Marine."

"A lot of the students have aspirations to go on to college, but they don't know how to go about it. Most are good in math, but how do you pass a math test when you don't know English?"

Vietnamese learn English

The English language class is taught by a refugee himself, Warren Vu Nguyen. In a recent class his booming voice commanded the constant attention of a dozen students as he admonished them about a previous homework assignment:

"I understand that you've been in the U.S. only five or six months, but you tell me you want to go to college. But how can you go to college if you make careless mistakes?"

Nguyen corrects them on every error in their written assignments, even to the extent of insisting sentence subjects agree in number with predicates.