

Relighting Hope for the Future through Welder Training

This program provides opportunities for disadvantaged people throughout Southern and Central California

BY BARBARA JACKSON

Seven years ago, Jimmy Brown was in a very depressed state. He had belonged to a gang with his brothers since the age of 12, dealt with dangerous people and situations, and his twin brother was shot and killed. His brother's death gave him a wake-up call. He realized his life was going in the wrong direction, but he didn't know how to get on a better path. Little did he know that a friend of his had

been to a jobs' fair and collected pamphlets for job training programs to hand out to his friends. He stopped by Brown's home one morning and handed him only one pamphlet for a free welder training program. As Brown was open to any path out of his current lifestyle, he called Steve Bunyard, the pastor in charge of the program. Bunyard gave Brown the orientation date, then cautioned him, "I want you

to be aware that this is a faith-based program."

Pastor Bunyard was familiar with folks like Brown. He experienced his own life change prior to Brown's phone call, when he visited the Fred Jordan Mission on Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles. He chatted with all sorts of people who were in a bad place in their lives. He left the experience with a desire to do something that



Pastor Steve Bunyard welcomes a new class of students to Relignite Hope, a nonprofit welder training program dedicated to providing development skills to men and women in disadvantaged populations.



Fig. 1 — Excited graduates receive their graduation certificates.

could really bring these souls hope for a stable future. Pastor Willie, the late Fred Jordan's wife, told him she believed many of these people could improve their lives simply by training in a job that could provide long-term opportunities. Before becoming a pastor, Bunyard learned how to weld, as he had previously owned a shop that sold high-performance car parts. He wrestled with a thought: Could these folks benefit from learning how to weld? With the support of the Fred Jordan Mission, he started a class with only five students. ReIgnite Hope was born.

Enhancing Employment Opportunities

ReIgnite Hope is a nonprofit welder training program that started on Skid Row. It provides skill development and employment opportunities to men and women, many of whom have been homeless, gang members, and ex-offenders. The organization also offers a free, four-month welding and metal fabrication program.

From its humble beginnings, the program has since moved locations several times to fulfill the increasing demands of prospective students. It is now permanently situated in a 6000-sq-ft welding facility housing 14 welding stations and a 30-seat classroom in Gardena, Calif. Potential applicants are referred to the program's administrators through a variety of local charitable organizations and simple word of mouth.

This process helps to identify those who are ready to make substantial changes in their lives and are eager to learn how to do life differently. Although it is a faith-based program, no student is required to convert to Christianity to be accepted into the program.

Program Guarantees Qualified Welders

Pastor Bunyard has gathered a cadre of volunteers who help with jobs ranging from welding instructors to student services to job placement. He also has two paid staff — a shop manager and a full-time program administrator — both of whom are also qualified welders. Many former students serve as mentors to the new students as they return to the facility to continue their education and receive additional welding qualifications.

As part of their training, students are instructed in basic math skills so they can do the necessary measuring and calculating to be proficient on the job. Those who are not competent receive additional tutoring. Students who did not graduate from high school are encouraged to obtain their high-school diplomas. As applicants come from all over southern and central California, the program's administrators work with each one to identify a GED program that will work with their current living and family situation. Toward the end of the program, students receive instruction in résumé preparation and interviewing skills. Students

who complete the course are tested by an American Welding Society (AWS) Certified Welding Inspector. Graduates are qualified in at least one of the following processes: gas metal, gas tungsten, shielded metal, and flux cored arc welding. Most graduates earn two qualifications. One hundred percent of the students who graduate from the program have passed their welding qualification exams.

ReIgnite Hope attributes their success to the unique and comprehensive design of the program. Students are followed from the moment they are first referred to their first job as a welder. Qualified and experienced staff and volunteers work one on one with each student to ensure they get the necessary skills and education to become employable upon graduation. Each student is valued and respected for their uniqueness. The staff also teaches and continuously encourages personal responsibility plus individual integrity throughout the four-month program. Along the way, each milestone in a student's journey is highlighted so they remain encouraged to complete the program.

Additionally, the program boasts a diverse race and gender student population. This helps to address the needs for well-paying jobs in disadvantaged populations and decrease gender-bias stereotyping within traditionally male-oriented careers.

ReIgnite Hope's success is also fueled by the continued need for qualified welders in southern California. AWS has estimated there will be a shortage of more than 290,000 welders in the United States by 2020 (Ref. 1). Given this shortfall, the program is starting to replicate itself across the United States and internationally. In 2017, ReIgnite Philly was started in Pennsylvania, and ReIgnite Hope Philippines began in the fall of 2018.

This year, ReIgnite Hope will establish its first class specifically for at-risk veterans to facilitate the transition from military to civilian employment. There is momentum to build a mobile training facility — an 18-wheel truck outfitted with eight welding booths — to serve cities throughout Orange County, Calif.

When the program initially started, graduates had an exceptional job placement rate of 80–90%. Students are steered toward potential jobs through existing employment pipelines with lo-



Fig. 2 — Chef Mike Martinez starts his training to become a welding instructor at ReIgnite Hope.

cal corporations and staffing agencies. ReIgnite Hope has also established an increasing number of partnerships with nonprofit and community organizations that focus on providing opportunities for the most difficult to employ individuals in Los Angeles County, including a few organizations that assist those reentering society after a recent incarceration.

Growth in Enrollment

With his team, Pastor Bunyard has been able to accomplish much of his vision. ReIgnite Hope has graduated more than 400 students and is currently training more than 150 students each year — Fig. 1. Last term, the program graduated 50 students; this term, more than 90 students are enrolled, not including the veterans' class, which could add another 30 students. However, as the program and student enrollment have grown, staff have found themselves stretched thin and unable to track both new and continuing job placement as well as give each student the directed attention of a welding in-



Fig. 3 — Former ReIgnite Hope student and long-time instructor Jimmy Brown (right) visits alongside each student, teaching them both welding and life skills.

structor. Administrators are in the process of applying for grants, specifically to hire another qualified welding instructor and a jobs program staff member to improve both the job placement and tracking of graduates.

Thankfully, the program is attracting more volunteers to fill some of these gaps in the interim. Mike Martinez is one of the most recent volunteers who is training to become a welding instructor — Fig. 2. Like Brown, Martinez comes from a disadvantaged background. He grew up in some of the poorer areas of Orange County and quickly adapted to street life. He also dealt drugs and was in and out of jail and prison. When he became a dad with two children, Martinez changed his perspective on how he was living life. He started Cordon Bleu training as part of his prison release program and soon became an accomplished chef. He also began attending church and ultimately became the impetus for his church to develop a social enterprise called 5000 Pies. This program trains at-risk youth in Long Beach, Calif., in culinary skills. However, when Martinez heard about ReIgnite Hope, he really felt a tug at his heart. Like Brown, he felt he could reach these students because of where he had been and what he had experienced.

Conclusion

ReIgnite Hope's formula for train-

ing people from disadvantaged populations and help them secure meaningful employment seems to be working. One of Pastor Bunyard's students from the first class in 2010 continues to work as a welder for the City of Los Angeles, a well-paying job with great benefits. And Brown? Pastor Bunyard was so impressed with his determination, work ethic, and presence that he hired him as the shop foreman where Brown continues to work today. He serves as both a welder trainer and life mentor — Fig. 3. He actively seeks out students who are trying to stay on the sidelines, and in his approachable way, says, "Hey, let's just take a quick break and go talk." He has connected with students and helps each of them with whatever they need — a meal, a place to sleep for the night, or just a talk with someone who gets them. It's clear this is more than just another program. As Brown says, "It's a life-changing experience."

For more information on ReIgnite Hope, go to reignitehope.com. 

Reference

1. Murphy, Cait. April 2014. Is there really a skills gap? *Inc. Magazine*.

BARBARA JACKSON (barbara.reignitehope@gmail.com) is a volunteer at ReIgnite Hope, Gardena, Calif.