

KINDNESS

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In It Together

Teaching welding skills with a side of compassion

By Deborah Paul

The single mother of three couldn't find her way out of the darkness that enveloped her life after multiple tragedies.

There was no hope, no light and no way out of the abyss, said Xiomara (Mara) Funez, after her teen son Javier took his own life in 2013.

As she grieved, eight months later tragedy struck her family again. The Downey resident's 21-year-old daughter Katy was involved in a bad car accident. Katy was hospitalized with fractures all over her body. Doctors told her emphatically, said Funez, that Katy wasn't going to make it.

After a long rehabilitation and a roller coaster of emotions for her mother, Katy walked out of the hospital on her own. She's currently working and going to college.

But, after seven years, the emotional toll left Funez functional, but still reeling, she said.

"In my case, I was healing, but I was still lost," Funez said.

She sought solace in work. She completed a program to learn to be a construction worker in 2019. She went through the motions, learning about plumbing, electrical and carpentry. She kept busy working for the Metropolitan Water District until her contract ran out in June this year.

But it wasn't until Funez signed up for a 16-week welding program at ReIgnite Hope in Gardena that she found a way to mend her heart.

Founder Steve Bunyard, his wife Lorri and a handful of volunteers started the welding school in 2011 when they helped five men experiencing homelessness at the Fred Jordan Mission in Los Angeles.

Nine years later ReIgnite Hope's classes prepare hundreds of men and women for new careers: veterans, ex-cons, former addicts, or anyone who wants to change the course of their lives. No one is turned away from the faith-based program, said Bunyard, and classes are free thanks to donations to the organization. Its shop covers a 6,000-sq. ft. warehouse with 15 welding stations, a 50-seat classroom, offices, work tables and supply areas the organization shares with an adjoining furniture company.

For Funez, it was watching Bunyard teach and meeting fellow classmates that made the difference and helped her find her spark.

"When I got to know the (ex) inmates who were at ReIgnite, I felt like I was in the right place, even if I've never been in prison," said Funez. "I was still in my own prison, but this gave me my freedom back."

She added Bunyard lives what he preaches with love and compassion, and everyone gets a second chance.

She said once she set her mind on



Xiomara Funez practices her welding skills at ReIgnite Hope, a program in Gardena founded by Steve Bunyard that has given hundreds of people a fresh start and viable careers.

welding, every step was a big celebration for her.

After graduation, she was hired by a major company which allows her to balance hours to be at home with her 10-year-old son, Gilberto.

In fact, according to Bunyard, all his students pass their welding certificates exam given by the American Welding Society on the first attempt and about 80-to-90 percent of ReIgnite Hope students are currently employed.

Manny Garcia, one of Funez's instructors and mentors said he was drawn to the spiritual aspect of the school and an opportunity to do some good in the community, so he took the class and came back to teach and coach full time.

"When Mara came in, it was one of those times, you couldn't tell on an application if a person is a good fit for the program," Garcia said.

"Once I met her, I could tell."

Garcia said Funez was an excellent student who worked hard and became a really good welder. After her first day at her new welding job, the Trillion Company called ReIgnite Hope to relay how happy they were with her and what an impact she made on other employees.

The mentors, instructors and other volunteers at ReIgnite Hope agree women welders are in big demand in technical industries, but there are places for everyone, Bunyard said.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there is a shortage of 250,000 welders nationwide.

But for now, Bunyard said operations are temporarily suspended due to the coronavirus lockdown. But, he's hoping to open two classes, following CDC guidelines, which, he said won't be too tough

Steve Bunyard, founder of ReIgnite Hope helps Xiomara Funez with a welding project at his facility in Gardena. (Photos by Axel Koester)

considering the welder's uniform: arc-safety helmets and thick work jackets and gloves.

And soon, Bunyard is taking his show on the road. He's putting the finishing touches on a \$150,000 prototype 18-wheeler fitted with eight welding work stations and a small classroom. The vehicle will travel, bringing the ReIgnite program to other cities.

The former pastor at Rolling Hills Covenant Church in Rolling Hills Estates gets help for ReIgnite Hope from his wife Lorri.

Lorri handles the back office finances, human resources, business related items, and sets up a program for students to easily compile resumes.

It's the love and care ReIgnite staff shows for its students that makes a difference, said Lorri. And, the students enrich the experience in their own ways.

"Each brings their own unique stories," Lorri said, referring to Funez. "... no matter what their back story is. ReIgnite Hope has a really nice, big encouraging environment and we want everyone to succeed — oh, and get them a job."

Funez, for her part, said she wants to return the favor by becoming a ReIgnite Hope volunteer.

"When I was in class, I made food for the veteran's class," said Funez, adding that normally, people don't take time to consider what others might be going through.

"Here, at ReIgnite Hope they teach you how to care," said Funez.

For more information, visit reignitehope.com.