

This former Rolling Hills pastor is taking his welding classes on the road in a big way

Written by Deborah Paul on April 22, 2021



Reignite Hope, a nonprofit that teaches people down on their luck to be welders, has just opened a traveling semi truck classroom that contains eight stations for individual instruction. They began classes Tuesday April 20, 2021 in the parking lot of a local church before hitting the road. Steve Bunyard who runs the mobile classroom talks to a local resident outside the classroom. (Photo by Chuck Bennett, Contributing Photographer)

Front and square on the Rolling Hills Covenant Church parking lot sits a brightly painted, 18-wheeler with the words “Those who HOPE in the Lord will renew their strength,” emblazoned on the sides.

Your eyes aren’t playing tricks.

Former Pastor Steve Bunyard-turned Re-Ignite Hope welding instructor and director gained permission from the church to conduct hands-on welding classes twice weekly in the shiny, new “Mobile Welding Training Center.”

The appearance of the fully contained 51-foot-long, 8-foot wide and 13.5-feet high trailer in Rolling Hills Estates has brought a flurry of activity surrounding the monster-size curiosity.

To conduct the free, 16-week Tuesday and Wednesday classes, Bunyard stands inside the front of the lengthy trailer on an up-raised platform armed with a marking pen and easel. To his right, eight welding stations are hidden behind thick plastic red curtains. On the left, 10 folding chairs are staggered in the little hallway across from the welding stations where students sit for Bunyard's daily briefings and de-briefings.

"We can train up to 24 at a time in a non-COVID scenario, but right now we're only doing 10," said Bunyard. "All we need now is a parking area, because we furnish our own gas, electricity and restroom."

Bunyard and RHCC's local outreach team recently collaborated with management staff at Harbor Hills, a low income housing site in Lomita/San Pedro to see if the welding school on wheels was a good fit for any of their residents.

Jeroll Rodgers who works in Youth Development Services for Harbor Hills said when the opportunity to join the Re-Ignite Hope program cropped up, about 30 residents showed an interest in earning their certification.

The Harbor Hills staff worked as a team, Rodgers said, to identify people they trusted who would start and complete the program.

Out of those 30, about 18 were interviewed. After that, eight students were chosen to begin the April inaugural training in the mobile unit.

"The Re-Ignite Hope program is a once in a lifetime opportunity to make more than \$100,000 year," Rodgers said. "With the Mobile Welding Training Center, resources are already in place."



Student welder, Rafael Mondragon of Harbor Hills, welds in the mobile classroom. (Photo by Chuck Bennett, Contributing Photographer)

Blanca Alvarez, 35, who lost her job at Home Goods during the pandemic said starting the class was a life changer for her.

With two boys ages 13 and 14 she needed to find another means of support. Now into her second week of training, Alvarez said she is more than thankful for the program.

“The staff at Re-Ignite Hope are very homey, and make us feel welcome,” said a petite Alvarez in her colorful helmet, turquoise, fireproof jacket and thick, protective gloves. “They’re patient, and any question is a good question. I told my boys, and they are telling all their friends about me.”

So far, there is only one mobile unit in existence, but other organizations are interested in the program at large.

Currently, through generous donations, Re-Ignite Hope, a Christian-based facility headquartered in Gardena, has helped establish welding schools in Philadelphia, the Philippines, Brazil and may soon appear in depressed areas in Dallas and Las Vegas, Bunyard said. The graduation rate is about 90 percent, with students finding jobs immediately after they become certified.

The warden at the Donovan State Prison in San Diego wants the Mobile Training Center to come and present welding courses to inmates re-entering society, Bunyard said. The prison authorities were going to give Re-Ignite Hope a whole building at the facility.

But now Re-Ignite Hope doesn’t need the building because they have the spiffy, new trailer.

“The warden told me if an inmate gets out of prison without a job skill, 87 percent of them will come back,” Bunyard said. If they get out with a job skill, only 13 percent go back to jail.

New classes starting in June will be in the parking lot of one of Re-Ignite Hope’s main partners, Grace Community Services, a nonprofit in Fullerton. Also in the works, is a possible training class in the parking lot of the USS Iowa in the San Pedro harbor for veterans who are having trouble getting jobs, Bunyard added.

There is a waiting list, but Bunyard said he would never discourage anyone to fill out an application from their website. Folks are screened with heavy consideration toward dire necessity and most motivated.

Jessica Bottomley, one of Re-Ignites welding coaches in the Mobile Training Center said she has coped with learning disabilities her whole life, but as a slow learner with a genuine desire to learn, everyone connected with the welding school helped her gain her certifications.

“In the Gardena shop, Steve has a sign with the 10 things a person can do that requires no talent,” Bottomley said. “Like showing up on time, always having a good attitude, or keeping your work area clean -- if you do those things, it will show your employer, even if you are a slow learner, you can be a good employee.”

As she looked around the bustling trailer, amidst the buzz of welding activity, she said, “There is no question Steve’s heart is to serve the people of this community, and I appreciate his vision.”