

LOCAL NEWS

Rekindling the emotional fire of ex-inmates, homeless, veterans — with welding



Pastor Steve Bunyard instructs Reignite Hope student Liddon Cowden who will graduate from the four-month welding program in Gardena in August. Photo: Deborah Paul

By **CONTRIBUTED CONTENT** |

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By Deborah Paul, contributing writer

About seven years ago, Pastor Steve Bunyard of Rolling Hills Covenant Church in Rolling Hills Estates, with the help of his wife Lorri and a handful of volunteers, ignited the spark.

Bunyard began a heartfelt task to help skid row men and women at the Fred Jordan Mission in Los Angeles get off the street and begin a new life.

A quiet-spoken, unpretentious gentleman who communicates in low modulated tones, he takes no credit for his endeavors. Instead he gives accolades to everyone else and certainly to God.

Nonetheless, Bunyard is the founder, instructor and facilitator of Reignite Hope, a school that helps students get certified in the welding trade.

The first class at the Fred Jordan Mission consisted of five homeless men. The class rapidly outgrew the space, but after two more moves the program finally settled in the larger facility in Gardena where no has since been turned away.

"We are proud of the statistic that 100 percent of our students pass their welding certificates exam given by the American Welding Society on the first try, and 90 percent are currently employed," said Bunyard in between answering student questions. "And our four-month program is free."



A student working toward his welding certification casts an eerie glow while working behind a red safety curtain on a project with Reignite Hope in Gardena. Photo: Deborah Paul

In August, the current 50 students will receive their certification.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there is a shortage of 250,000 welders nationwide which makes this skilled trade in high demand. The way Reignite Hope asks students to give back is to help around the shop as a volunteer.

"Around the shop" means a 6,000 sq. ft. warehouse encompassing 13 welding stations, a 50-seat classroom, offices, work tables and supply areas Reignite Hope shares with an adjoining furniture company.

The place bustles with activity, and not just because sparks are flying.

Students wearing arc-safety helmets and thick green jackets practice on metal chunks using blow torches behind welding stations with red vinyl curtains.

Shop foreman Jimmy Brown, one of Bunyard's first students, has been with the Reignite Hope program for six years.

His story is poignant.

“I was a gang member. Sold drugs,” said Brown who had also been shot three different times. “I was selfish, I didn’t care who I hurt. I finally got tired of going in and out of jail and decided to start doing life the legal way.”

Right about the time his mother told him to get on his knees and pray for direction, a friend gave him a brochure about the new welding school on skid row.

“Pastor Steve said, ‘I hope you don’t mind if this is a faith-based program,’” Brown said. “Since that time, it has been a life changing experience.”

Tiffany Simi, 23, is another success story.



The next step in Reignite Hope’s expansion program to help change lives will involve this prototype trailer with eight welding stations and a portable classroom. Photo: Deborah Paul

“I was recently incarcerated for eight months,” said Simi who is doing an internship with Reignite Hope. “Through Home Boy Industries — a nonprofit organization started by a priest, — they offered me a job and I went through their training program. Then they directed me to Reignite Hope to help establish my career in welding. Now I’m fully certified.”

Bunyard’s latest innovation is in the form of a \$150,000 prototype 18-wheeler fitted with eight welding work stations and a small classroom that will travel around the nation filling the demand for Reignite Hope programs.

The Harbor Hills housing projects in Lomita and the Rolling Hills Covenant Church parking lot will most likely be the first places the inaugural truck/trailer will be parked. Funds are now being raised as the logistics of building the vehicle are fine tuned, Bunyard said.

So far communities and churches in Phoenix, Oakland, Chicago and a farming community in Turlock want to have trailers or warehouses stationed among their neediest communities, Bunyard said.

“In Denver, their biggest challenge is to find buildings for a Reignite Program,” said Bunyard, undeterred with his vision for the future. “It appears all the big buildings in Colorado are going to marijuana factories, but for us, God is opening all the doors.”

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