

Sparking Transformation

Steve Bunyard's nonprofit teaches welding and life skills to society's downtrodden.

Written by Nancy Sokoler Steiner | Photographed by Micheal Neveux

The young man had just been released from prison and had little hope of finding a job to support himself. After all, who would hire someone with a criminal record and no skills? Then Rudy found himself at ReIGNITE Hope, a nonprofit that offers free career training in welding. After completing 100 hours of training and earning professional certification, Rudy quickly secured employment as a union welder helping build the Banc of California Stadium in Downtown Los Angeles.

"He completely turned his life around," says Rev. Steve Bunyard, founder and director of ReIGNITE Hope. "This experience is life-changing for students."

Bunyard never imagined he'd end up creating a program that has trained close to 1,000 welders and boasts a 6,000-square-foot Gardena facility equipped with 15 welding stations. As the outreach pastor at Rolling Hills Covenant Church, he partnered with Fred Jordan Missions in Downtown Los Angeles. Bemoaning how the impoverished clientele would come for food and assistance month after month, Bunyard prayed for inspiration.

He had worked in the high-performance auto industry prior to becoming an ordained minister and was certified as a professional welder. Bunyard wondered if he could teach this skill to some of the mission's clients, in order to give them a marketable skill and hope for a better future.

In 2011 he started with a class of five students at the mission. "It took off like a rocket," he says. Today demand for training is so great that in addition to the Gardena facility, ReIGNITE Hope outfitted an 18-wheeler truck with eight additional welding stations. The mobile classroom, stationed at Rolling Hills Covenant Church on specific days, provides classes locally and travels to other areas.

The nonprofit depends entirely on donations for its funding. Although COVID-19 forced a temporary reduction in class sizes, ReIGNITE

Hope graduated 51 students last fall and another 60 in May.

"Most participants have had hard lives and aren't well educated," says Bunyard. "Some are homeless or re-entering from jail and gangs. Others are working poor. They've lost hope and don't see a bright future. We try to reignite that hope."

While he employs instructors to teach welding, Bunyard attends class each day to discuss good work habits and life choices with students. In addition to welding, students learn practical skills such as budgeting and saving.

The program also helps participants find jobs before they even test for certification. "They're employed as soon as they're certified," says Bunyard, who helps students determine what fields they'd enjoy most. Graduates have found well-paying union jobs in industries including aerospace, manufacturing and construction.

Bunyard marvels at how participants transform over the course of their training. "It's remarkable to see how different they are at the end of the program." •

A student works in one of the ReIGNITE Hope mobile welding bays as she trains for her certification. According to Steve Bunyard, most students are employed as soon as they are certified.



Steve Bunyard, founder and director of ReIGNITE Hope, stands in front of the organization's 18-wheeler mobile training unit truck in the Rolling Hills Covenant Church parking lot.