

## CONTRA COSTA

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## Construction program gives troubled youths a direction

■ **SAN LEANDRO:**  
Project teaches juvenile offenders the skills to build path to success

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As he works in the nearly completed \$176 million Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center, Ramiro Barajas talks about the drastic change of direction in his life.

"I'm doing something better than what I was doing before," he said as he sat at the building's

central controls, working on the security system.

What Barajas was doing before got him sent to the old Juvenile Justice Center, just down Fairmont Drive in San Leandro. Eventually, it led to Camp Wilmont Sweeney, an unlocked, 24-hour residential program where teens serve out their court sentences for nonviolent crimes.

It was at the camp that the 19-year-old Oakland resident became involved in the Cornerstone Foundation for Educational Advancement project, a collaboration

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DOUG DURAN/TIMES

**JULIO GONZALES**, 20, of Hayward works on a door handle Thursday at the new Juvenile Justice Center in San Leandro. He is a graduate of the Cornerstone Foundation program.

## Youths

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between the county's Office of Education and Wayne Perry and his San Francisco construction management firm Cornerstone Concilium Inc. The project allows teens at the camp interested in construction and building to interview with Perry for a chance at a rigorous 12-week program.

Perry began the foundation 20 years ago. He wanted to create a program where kids could learn about a trade that interested them, something many struggle to find. Perry said he knew when he was 16 that he wanted to be an architect but had no idea how to break into the field.

"I wanted to do something to give back to the community," Perry said.

Three and a half years ago, Perry and his company teamed with the county to teach minors in the juvenile justice system the principles of design and construction.

Classes and workshops meet four days a week for two to four hours at a time. The dedication and time required is too much for some, as only about half of the kids in the 30-student program finish it.

Barajas is one of three Cornerstone graduates working on the new juvenile hall — all having been residents of the old hall, all now learning skills to help build a career.

"I think this all has made me career driven," said Ashton Se-

nior, 19, of Fremont, a Cornerstone graduate and now the on-site office engineer. "I think it's helped shape my life and shown me what's out there. It's helped me grow."

Jim Mosier, senior construction manager for Vanir Construction, which is managing the new hall site, said the most impressive thing he has seen from the program and its graduates working at the site is how much they've learned from the program and how much they can handle on the job.

"They're not here getting other people coffee," Mosier said. "They are doing real work and have real responsibility, and they understand that."

Toni Adams, director of student programs and services for the county's office of education,

said that these young men can do shouldn't come as a shock to anyone.

"As one of them once told me, 'Just because we did what we did to get here, it doesn't mean we're stupid,'" Adams said. "That's very true."

Julio Gonzales, 20, of Hayward has been working at the juvenile facility site for nearly two years. When he entered the juvenile justice system, he said he wasn't sure what he wanted to do. Since then, he has become a union carpenter.

"I really didn't want to do nothing," Gonzales said. "I just wanted to chill. But they say you gotta work."

That's what these three will do at the site for at least a little while longer, before the center is set to open in April. After

that, they hope to catch on at other job sites and continue building for a future some might have questioned just a few years ago.

"Ten years from now," Barajas said, "I want to be in construction management."

That may have sounded unlikely once, but through a lot of hard work and a decision to change his life, it now is completely reasonable. And what Barajas may lack in experience, he makes up for in confidence.

When asked how well he knows the juvenile hall layout, Barajas laughs.

"Come on man, we built this thing," he said with a smile.

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