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A New Gang Comes to Los Angeles: Solar-Panel Installers

In Tough Economy, Homeboy Industries Trains Ex-Cons for Brighter Prospects

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By MIRIAM JORDAN

LOS ANGELES -- When Albert Ortega was released from prison four months ago, he was determined to turn his life around. So he went green.

Mr. Ortega sports tattoos of an Aztec warrior on his back, a dragon on his chest and the name of his former gang, the East Side Wilmas, rings his biceps. Drug trafficking kept him locked up for most of the past seven years, he says. But after serving his last term, for 18 months, he heard about a solar-panel installation course.

"I wanted a new way of life," says the tall, brawny 34-year-old. "Solar puts me on the cutting edge."

Solar Panels for Ex-Cons

2:46

A training program in East Los Angeles is teaching ex-cons to install solar panels so they can improve their skill set and market themselves for the new green economy. WSJ's Russ Britt reports.



In the race to train America's "green-collar" work force, a group composed mostly of former Los Angeles gang members on parole is an early participant. Their training is funded by Homeboy Industries, a Los Angeles nonprofit that helps people with criminal pasts find employment.

President Barack Obama has made the production of renewable energy one of the pillars of job creation. All sorts of people are now rushing to acquire skills to launch careers in the budding sector.

For years, Homeboy Industries put former felons to work at a bakery and cafe it runs in East Los Angeles. Last summer, founder Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest, was approached by a supporter about the idea of preparing them for the green economy.

Because job-placement for ex-convicts is especially difficult in a recession, "I leapt at the opportunity," says Father Boyle, who started Homeboy two decades ago.

Homeboy joined forces with the East Los Angeles Skills Center, a public vocational school that offers a hands-on program to teach the design, construction and installation of solar panels.

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The course is one of only a few such programs in California and commands a months-long waiting list.



ALBERT ORTEGA

The center created an intensive course for Homeboy. "I loved the idea of doing something for these guys," says Brian Hurd, the senior instructor who designed it. "My best student ever was a Homeboy referral" in a construction course, "who needed a second chance."

Homeboy, funded by individuals, community groups and revenue from its businesses, pays the \$131 tuition for each student; it also pays participants an hourly wage of \$8. The class meets for two months, weekdays from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

"I was so motivated, I would fall asleep with the books on my bed," says Mr. Ortega. Determined to get into the course, he phoned or visited Father Boyle for two weeks, until he was asked to take a drug test. Mr. Ortega passed and was offered a spot in the class.

"I knew I was good at wiring," says Mr. Ortega, who once installed car-stereo systems. "I was always good at math."

On a recent morning, some 30 tattoo-coated students sat at desks in a basement classroom, taking notes as their instructor scrawled algebra equations and geometry problems on a chalkboard. Then they figured out such things as the area of a house's roof and the angle at which solar panels should be mounted on it.

Manuel Delgado, 42, who dropped out of high school, said he struggled at first. But, four weeks into the class, he's doing "real good," he says. "I got 76% on my last math test."

Another student, Jessica Espinoza, 23, says she couldn't find a job after being locked up for two years because she helped a felon escape from a courthouse. "The minute they saw I went to jail, employers didn't give me the time of day," she says. "Hopefully I can take what this school gave me and make a career in this new industry."

In the afternoon, the students donned protective goggles and got to work on solar panels and electrical circuits in the workshop. At one station, they drilled holes through aluminum rails where panels are mounted; others drove bolts into metal racks. A few studied the layout of a roof to figure out sizing for pipes.



Miriam Jordan / The Wall Street Journal

Homeboy Industries, a Los Angeles nonprofit, helps prepare students to enter the 'green-collar' work force

Mr. Ortega helped his classmates wire up a panel. One was Ken Chung, a general contractor who decided to train for a career in solar energy after his business of building homes and pools began to dry up.

After months searching for a training program, Mr. Chung decided the Homeboy course would give him the skills he needed. But when he informed his wife that most of his classmates would be ex-felons, she was worried. "I told her, 'Honey, just give me a week to try and see,' " he recalls.

On his first day, he says a fellow student asked: "What were you in for?" Mr. Chung, a 45-year-old Malaysian immigrant, didn't understand. "I asked him to repeat the question."

The East L.A. Skills Center offers a night class in photovoltaic installation (the official name of solar-panel installation) that is open to the general public, but there's a long waiting list. That's why some "regular folks" have been clamoring to get into the Homeboy class, says Ed Ruiz,

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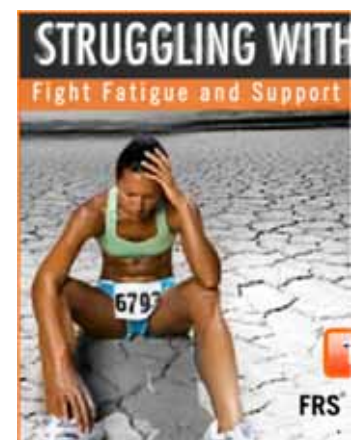
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the instructor. "Most of them take one look and say 'no thanks,' " he says.

Doug Lincoln, 61, who once managed luxury-car dealerships, was offered admission to the Homeboy course after he inquired about a faster-paced class. On hearing it was mainly for ex-cons, "I thought it was a joke," he says.

Now, Mr. Lincoln is about to graduate. He plans to start a solar-panel-installation firm, he says, and hire some of his former Homeboy classmates. "These guys are more motivated than hundreds of employees I've managed," in the car business, he says.

Mr. Chung, the contractor, has also thrived in the class. He and Mr. Ortega get together for lunch on the weekends, either tacos or Chinese noodles. "Albert has taught me many things," says Mr. Chung. They challenge each other to design solar-energy systems for homes and then critique each other's work. "I know about his kids. He knows about mine," says Mr. Ortega.

Last month, Mr. Ortega passed an exam that qualifies him to install solar panels nationwide. He says he has already been approached by employers. But he says he is waiting until Feb. 16, when he's off parole, before starting work, because until then he can't travel out of Los Angeles County. When that happens, he says, "I'll be just another citizen."

Several of his classmates who completed the course are already working, earning about \$15 an hour; experienced installers can make upwards of \$30 an hour. Philippe Hartley, general manager of Phat Energy, a Los Angeles solar company, has hired several Homeboy graduates. The Los Angeles Unified School District plans to start hiring some graduates of the program to install 50 megawatts of solar power on its campuses. "Being former gang members doesn't preclude them from building a career in solar technology," says Veronica Soto, a school-district director.

Others are also interested. "We expect to hire out of the program as quickly as they can get them to us," says Gabriel Bork, a vice president at Golden State Power, a solar-panel installation company. "These guys are much better trained than many others I have hired."

Write to Miriam Jordan at miriam.jordan@wsj.com

Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page A1

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