

OCEANSIDE: Summer jobs mean more than money for 'Working Pirates'

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Christina Christiansen, 16, copies documents at Oceanside City Hall on Thursday as a part of a student intern program called Working Pirates. (Photo by Jamie Scott Lytle - Staff Photographer)

When Larry Smith was a freshman at Oceanside High School, teachers sent him to the office 49 times.

He couldn't control his behavior, and he didn't really care, explained the young man, who just finished his sophomore year.

But this past school year, Larry went to the office only twice. The 16-year-old said his turnaround started toward the end of his freshman year when a case manager from a local social services agency approached him at school.

"How would you like to make some money?" Larry recalled him saying.

Larry is one of about 20 students who started paid summer internships at the city of Oceanside this week as part of Interfaith Community Services' Working Pirates program, named after the school's mascot.

A handful of students also have been placed at Tri-City Medical Center and the California Surf Museum, said Steve Gomes, one of two case managers who supervises the students.

The program takes students in danger of dropping out or joining a gang and turns them toward a productive future with the promise of a good summer job every year until they graduate, Gomes said. During the school year, the Working Pirates receive weekly personalized counseling and enrichment activities that prepare them for work. Students must maintain a C average to participate, and they receive free tutoring.

"The job is really a carrot, the carrot to motivate them to come to school, have good attendance and go to counseling once a week," Gomes said.

The program is designed to support students until they graduate. It started in March 2008 with a small number of freshmen and sophomores, mostly from Oceanside High, and has grown to 35 students, Gomes said.

Jeannine Guarino, who oversees the program with Interfaith, said the U.S. Department of Labor agreed to fund the program for four years. This year's cost is about \$131,000, with funding for the next fiscal year expected to increase as the program enrolls its full 40 students, Guarino said.

Larry said the idea of making money hooked him into the program, and a job last summer at the Public Library, along with the counseling and other activities, have reoriented his life.

"Where I am from, on the Eastside, barely anyone comes out of the Eastside; they're born there and they're still there," Larry said, referring to his gang-riddled Oceanside neighborhood. "One of my motivations is to come out of the Eastside and be something. I decided, why be like them when I can be something better?"

This week, Larry started a summer job in code enforcement, patrolling with an officer and painting over graffiti. All the students in the program earn \$8.75 per hour and work 20 hours a week, with the Department of Labor grant paying their wages.

The Pirates are referred by their counselors, administrators and teachers because of academic and behavior problems. To qualify, students must be from a low-income family or qualify for Special Education. A few of the kids are on probation, according to Vu Nguyen, a second case agent.



Audris Silva, 16, files documents for the city of Oceanside on Thursday as part of a student intern program called Working Pirates. (Photo by Jamie Scott Lytle - Staff Photographer)

But even the toughest cases can be reached, Nguyen said.

"Once you're built that personal relationship with these kids, you realize all they need is a chance," he said.

Larry said that once Gomes and Nguyen persuaded him to aim for college and a career, maybe in sports medicine, he learned how to work toward that goal everyday.

He chose a seat at the front of each class, to avoid distractions, as his mentors taught him. He admitted to himself that shirking homework was just laziness. When on the brink of acting up in class, he kept his mouth shut, thinking, "What would happen if I said that at City Hall?"

Christina Christiansen, 16, who is working in the city's Human Resources Department this summer, said the program has helped to motivate her.

"It changed me a lot," she said. "I didn't really care about school; I was like, whatever. That's my main focus now. School and getting a good job."

Christina said she might want to be a coroner, psychologist or a city worker when she graduates.

Working Pirates also learn lessons specific to the workplace: how to write a resume, how to train for particular careers, how to dress for work.

On Thursday, 15-year-old Pedro Guzman started his summer job with the Housing Department. He wore neat black trousers and a collared, long-sleeve work shirt and remembered to look people in the eye when shaking hands.

His duties included taking notes during a meeting about the 2010 census and giving city leaders suggestions about how census-takers might find people in his own Crown Heights neighborhood.

He said he looked forward to buying his sister a quinceanera present with some of the money he makes this summer.

Many students in the program use their earnings to help their families, Nguyen said. All students are required to open a bank account, and they get lessons in financial management.