

Those who failed to graduate succeed at Ventura continuing education school

Carol Lawrence
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VENTURA, Calif. - Juliana Gomez, Miguel Macias and Philip Olive are among the lucky ones. Unlike many who have left school without graduating — an “invisible” population often living on the edge of society — the three found their way through a specialized program at the Ventura Adult and Continuing Education school. Now 5 years old, the program is considered a success by its case managers, Ventura Unified School District officials and the students themselves.

“They’ve helped me find me,” Gomez said, brushing away tears one recent afternoon as she talked about the impact the school’s case managers had on her life. “If it wasn’t for them, I don’t know where I’d be.”

She could still be homeless, Gomez said, as she was for two years after dropping out of high school. Instead, Gomez has a place to live, earned her GED, works two jobs and takes classes at Ventura College. And she’s pursuing career goals.

“I like who I am now because of the help I’ve gotten,” said Gomez, 20.

The adult ed program, overseen by Ventura Unified, focuses on 18- to 21-year-olds from low-income families who aren’t enrolled in any school, live in Ventura County and are U.S. citizens.

Through funding from the federal Workforce Investment Act, administered by the local Workforce Investment Board, teachers fill the academic gaps so students can get a high school diploma or GED.

Staff members also train students on basic computer skills, coach them to earn a National Workforce Readiness Credential, and teach interviewing and job search skills. The program also pays for pre-interview haircuts, clothes, bus passes, gas cards and phones.

Many of the students are dealing with issues that could prevent them from getting a job, said case manager Jeffrey Albaugh. The issues include pregnancy and homelessness.

“The world looks very bleak for these kids. Depression is frequent,” Albaugh said. “They have to see going to work as something that is going to take them forward.”

Albaugh and other case managers assess the students’ personalities and try to determine their real interests so they can steer them into practical, feasible career paths.

Students completing the program with a high school diploma or GED have gone on to work as auto mechanics, auto salespeople, plumber assistants, pharmacy technicians and medical office employees, among other jobs.

Case managers keep track of how they are doing at various intervals for a year, Albaugh said. They ask for evidence that they’re working, such as pay stubs. “We’re being a good parent,” he said.

Finding this “invisible” population is a constant challenge for case managers. Many are homeless and move around, Albaugh said, and there is no accurate count of their numbers.

As a result, most participants come to the school through referrals from others in the program.

About 50 students participate each year, according to Albaugh. Last year there were 56, and this year there are 10, but that will likely increase this fall as young people start thinking about school.

Goals for the program are set by the Workforce Investment Board and its youth council. Its most recent goals called for at least 60 percent of students to earn a high school degree or GED, and 75 percent actually achieved that. In literacy and numeracy skills, the goal was for at least 60.5 percent of students to become proficient, and 62.5 percent succeeded. Regarding employment, the program exceeded a 70 percent goal with a 72 percent rate, according to Albaugh.

“We’ve always made our goals,” he said.

Trudy Arriaga, superintendent of Ventura Unified, has lauded the program. It is of “critical importance” to the school district and the county’s economic vitality, she said.

“We don’t want the youth in our community to be struggling,” Arriaga said. “We want them to have a career that pays more than minimum wage so they can eat in our restaurants and buy homes in our community.”

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RICHARD QUINN/SPECIAL TO THE STAR Miguel Macias loads automobile supplies into a truck to be delivered in Camarillo. Macias is a driver for Warren Distributing Inc. He is also a student in the Ventura Adult and Continuing Education school.



DAVID YAMAMOTO/SPECIAL TO THE STAR Hostess Juliana Gomez, a Ventura College student, operates the cash computer at the host desk at O-Sabi Japanese restaurant in Ventura.



RICHARD QUINN/SPECIAL TO THE STAR Miguel Macias (right) is a student in the Ventura Adult and Continuing Education school. Jeffrey Albaugh is his lead case manager at the school.



RICHARD QUINN/SPECIAL TO THE STAR Miguel Macias is a student in the Ventura Adult and Continuing Education school.



DAVID YAMAMOTO/SPECIAL TO THE STAR Hostess Juliana Gomez, a Ventura College student, greets friend Lu Murrietta, a longtime customer at the O-Sabi Japanese restaurant in Ventura. Gomez said she received lots of help when she attended the Ventura Adult and Continuing Education school.

Students find their way back with help of Ventura school

Carol Lawrence
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VENTURA, Calif. - Miguel Macias of Oxnard tried three times to get his high school diploma, but home situations and money issues always kept it beyond his reach.

Now 21, Macias' GED is nearly in his grasp through the Ventura Adult and Continuing Education school. And his plan to attend a Los Angeles college to pursue a music career is back on track.

"I don't know where I would be (without the adult ed school)," Macias said. "They pushed me. If not, I'd probably be on a different path, and one that is counterproductive."

Macias left high school before his senior year to help his mother recuperate from open heart surgery and an uncle from diabetes. His mother needed full-time care during the day, but his father worked, and his siblings had lives and families of their own.

"I was the only one left," Macias said.

Macias tried the independent study route, doing the homework through most of the year. But he couldn't leave his bedridden mother alone to submit his assignments, he said.

In 2012, he began GED classes at the Oxnard Adult School and was doing well, Macias said. But when his father was laid off, Macias had to leave school to get a job to support the family.

One more time he would enroll and have to leave school, this time for not having enough money for gas.

"I was more upset about it because I wanted to get it (the GED) done," he said.

In January, Macias began taking Ventura adult ed classes after an Oxnard school staffer told him about the program. He's pursuing his GED while working full-time.

A drummer who has performed with his musician father since he was 7, Macias hopes to go to the private Musicians Institute in Hollywood to become an audio engineer and produce film and television scores.

"They are very supportive," Macias said of his new school. "They try to bring out the best in you."

JULIANA GOMEZ

Juliana "Jewelz" Gomez's boyfriend convinced her they could live on the streets when she was 18. He told her they could save money, and she wouldn't have to live with, or listen to, her mother.

She believed him, thinking she loved him. But he wouldn't get a job and made her pay for everything, she said.

They were living in the Ventura River bottom. All she had was a job mopping floors and bussing tables at a fast-food restaurant, a small backpack and a bike. A friend of a friend told her about Ventura adult ed.

"He mentioned a lot of good things about it," Gomez said. She decided to enroll because the friend told her she could get a better job with a GED.

She started and stopped the program a couple of times, distracted by the boyfriend and other issues. But case managers at the school wouldn't let her go, she said. She turned a corner and became serious.

It took Gomez three times to pass the math part of the GED before earning it in late 2013.

"I almost fainted," she said.

The case managers helped her write a new résumé, which gave her confidence and self-esteem. In April, she got a job as a hostess at the O-Sabi Japanese restaurant in Ventura and loves it.

Gomez now has a place to live, takes five classes at Ventura College and left the boyfriend. She's aiming to become a bartender and eventually a personal fitness trainer.

Brushing away tears, Gomez said the case managers are her family, and that they saved her life.

"They really believed in me," Gomez said. "They told me not to give up on my life."

Each year, a small number of young adults in an out-of-school youth program enroll in the program's career technical classes.

The non-degree courses offer certificates, such as in computer-aided design, and are intended to kick start careers for the most-dedicated students. This year, 10 are taking the technical courses.

PHILIP OLIVE

Camarillo resident Philip Olive, 19, is one of those 10. Olive was going to the "private and pricey" Master's College in Santa Clarita on a federal GI Bill that paid his tuition.

He lost the funding, he said, and had no money to pay for another year. He enrolled in Ventura adult ed after his mom, who is taking accounting classes there, suggested its youth program. Olive agreed, he said, after hearing great things about the program.

"Most of the people going there are already hardworking adults, so they have a good reputation, and they also know all of their stuff," Olive said.

Olive has a high school diploma from Camarillo High School, where he took classes in AutoCAD, architecture and engineering, and industrial design software. He's now taking similar classes in Ventura.

One month into the program, Olive said, he likes how the program is structured.

"They have me in hand-drafting before going into computer architecture," Olive said. "It's a really good skill to know and helps you with the ability to draw things on the computer."

His plan is to get a certificate in architecture and also take industrial design courses. He hopes that will help get him a job in the field that pays enough to help him possibly finance a four-year degree.