

Youth offenders graduate from first construction program at Camarillo facility

By Cindy Von Quednow
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Jamie Ortiz, 19, has been in and out of youth correctional facilities since he was 11. But after June 5, he hopes he can start over and get a driver's license and a job.

He was one of 10 young men who graduated Wednesday from the first career technical education program focused on construction at the Ventura Youth Correctional Facility in Camarillo.

"I learned a lot of skills from this class," he said. "I am proud of myself."

Ortiz has had issues with drugs and gangs in the past, but with his newfound skills in construction, he is confident he will move forward in his life.

Anthony Lucero, deputy director of operations and programs for the state Division of Juvenile Justice, congratulated the graduates and said finishing the intense six-month course is a major accomplishment.

"Your graduation should serve as a launching point to wherever your careers take you," Lucero said. "The road ahead will not be easy, but you are better prepared."



Daniel Ayala gets a hug from his mother, Deisy Abrego, wearing a construction helmet, after he graduated Wednesday from the pre-apprentice construction labor program at the Ventura Youth Correctional Facility in Camarillo. Photo by Chuck Kirman, Ventura County Star

In completing the program, put on by the California Prison Industry Authority, the graduates are closer to landing a job in construction labor. Graduates are encouraged to obtain a high school diploma or complete a GED within two years to enhance their chances of employment.

During the program, students learned how to use construction tools and helped construct a pool at the facility, which will be opening next week.

Charles Pattillo, general manager of the Prison Industry Authority, said the goal is to reduce recidivism and give ex-offenders the tools to make a living on the outside. He said every graduate will receive a set of tools and a belt upon their release.

Pattillo said the pre-apprentice construction labor program is one of the most successful offered by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, producing graduates who have a recidivism rate of less than 7 percent.

"We want you to become good citizens, sons and fathers," Pattillo told the graduates.



After Pattillo said each graduate would receive their certificate and a hard hat, he told them, “Smile big, smile pretty!”

Audience members clapped loudly and cheered as the graduates made their way to the front of the room. One audience member even jingled her keys as staff yelled each inmate’s last name.

Roy Borgersen, an instructor for a laborers union in Northern California, usually works with adult offenders but decided to help out in Camarillo when someone told him he would be perfect for the job.

Although it was his first time working with youth, Borgersen knew firsthand how difficult it could be because he was incarcerated as a teen.

“I would rather help a knucklehead get a second chance, because I was once a knucklehead,” Borgersen said.

Many of the graduates credited Borgersen with helping them succeed in the program.

“I know I did something right. I gave someone hope.” Borgersen said. “I was a part of changing someone’s life.”

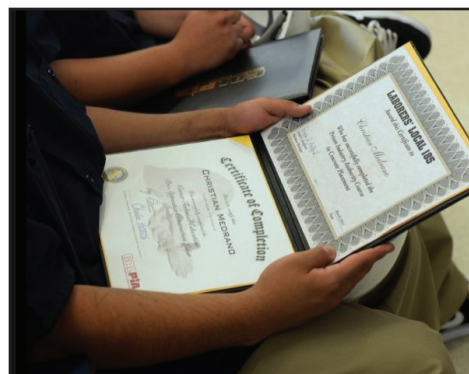
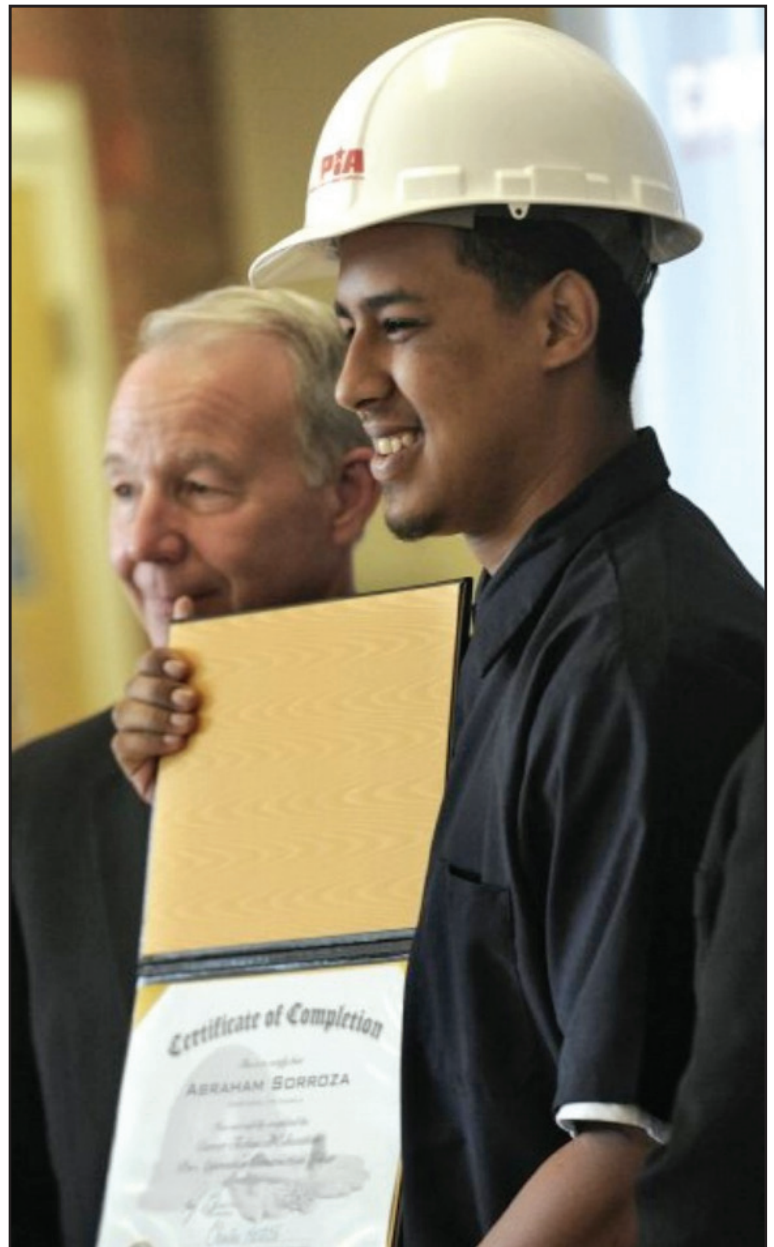
After the graduation, Daniel Ayala, 20, of North Hollywood, was eating cake decorated with a yellow hard hat and tools, made inside the facility by staff and inmates.

He said he was glad he could share his accomplishment with his parents and older sister, who attended the ceremony.

“I’m happy I actually accomplished it and made it through,” said Ayala, who has been incarcerated for four years in connection with attempted murder and second-degree robbery.

He hopes to finish his education and pursue a career in construction when he is released in three months.

“This is an open door, so I’m going to take it,” he said.



Ayala’s mother, Deisy Abrego, said she is proud of him and thankful to the Prison Industry Authority for giving her son this opportunity. Ayala’s incarceration has not been easy for Abrego, but she said his graduation has given her family hope.

“When he hit bottom, it was like I was right there with him,” Abrego said in Spanish. “But he has taught me so much, and I tell him, ‘I have not lived through what you have.’ I admire him so much.”