

## Green Jobs Training Program Mixes Hope with Jobs

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*Program participants in carpentry class*

Norman Feliciano credits the green jobs training program at Allen Temple Baptist Church in East Oakland with helping him put his life on a positive track.



Participant in math class, Eric Thomas (left) and Norman Feliciano.



Allen Temple Baptist Church Pastor Rev. J. Alfred Smith, Jr. (left) and Danny Glover.

"I'm not just learning a lot here academically," said Feliciano, 44, who spent a lot of his life behind bars, serving seven prison terms. In the past, he said, "Every time I came out I had nothing to look forward to but the same old thing. (This program) is a major confidence builder – you can't put a price on what I've learned."

Feliciano is one of 35 participants who are currently enrolled in the "green built" apprenticeship program operated by the Allen Temple Housing and Economic Development Corporation, a faith-based nonprofit that works to transform lives through training and career development for formerly incarcerated individuals and other community members facing employment obstacles.

Since its start in 1998, over 700 graduates have gone through the pre-apprenticeship program, which has shifted its emphasis in the last few years to green training. Participants study mathematics to prepare for apprenticeship exams, blueprint design and interpretation, how to start a small business, computers and job readiness skills.

They also learn solar panel installation, weatherization, hazardous materials removal and receive hands on experience in carpentry, plumbing and electrical work. Participants receive equipment they need to start out in the industry: goggles, hard hats, steel-toed boots and basic tools.

Actor and activist Danny Glover was keynote speaker at a celebration on Tuesday morning at Allen Temple for the 12 newest graduates of the program.

One of the graduates, James Smith, confessed that he had done "something I am ashamed of and my family is ashamed of. It made it difficult to feel like a human being," he said. "(But here) I have learned to dream again."

Choked with emotion, Glover, who grew up in San Francisco, explained that he identified with the heroism of the participants and their personal struggles to transform themselves, their community and the country. "We can use our hands to shape our relationships, to dream in a different way. I'm here to celebrate you," he said.

According to Attorney John Harrison, the program's executive director, Allen Temple's graduates have about a 10 percent recidivism rate, dramatically less than the nearly 70 percent rate at which formerly incarcerated individuals in California return to prison.

"We gear everything toward unions because of the level of wages you can receive," Harrison said. In addition, the construction industry is an important focus because it traditionally "is very forgiving toward the formally incarcerated. They don't care what your background is, as long as you can do the work, show up on time, follow orders and have the right attitude."

The program operates eight hours a day, four days a week for 16 weeks. Three groups complete the course each year. Besides the academic and construction focus, participants receive the personal support they need, including help with transportation and housing issues, substance abuse referrals and anger management classes.

Also extremely important is the nutritious hot lunch every day because "hunger is a real issue," Harrison said.

With the support of local businesses and the outreach efforts of program's employment resource advisor, participants are able to find temporary or permanent jobs in the area.

Funding for the training comes from a variety of sources, including federal Workforce Investment Act money through the state, as well as some city resources and in kind contributions of space and other services from Allen Temple.

The church also provides an intangible but crucial resource, its name, Harrison said. The program benefits from the reputation that Allen Temple has in the community. "Allen Temple has a brand name, for caring, love and competency," he said. "They come there with the confidence that people care about you, that (the staff) aren't just there for a job."

Another participant in the program is Willard Cooley, who explains that he is a "full blooded Navaho" who heard about the program after he came to the Bay Area a year ago. He had moved from the United Indian Nation on the border between Arizona and New Mexico to be in an alcoholism recovery program.

Now, he sees the possibility of a new career. "I'd like to give it a year to try to stay (in the Bay Area). I'd like to find my way in solar energy," he said.

The Allen Temple Housing and Economic Development Corporation is located at the Dr. J. Alfred Smith Sr., Training Academy at 8501 International Blvd. in Oakland. For information call (510) 567-1476.