

Former Rolling Hills Estates pastor takes welding classes on the road in a big way



Reignite Hope, a nonprofit that teaches people down on their luck to be welders, has just opened a traveling semi truck classroom that contains eight stations for individual instruction. They began classes Tuesday April 20, 2021 in the parking lot of a local church before hitting the road. Steve Bunyard who runs the mobile classroom talks to a local resident outside the classroom. (Photo by Chuck Bennett, Contributing Photographer)

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Front and square on the Rolling Hills Covenant Church parking lot sits A brightly painted 18-wheeler sits in the parking lot of Rolling Hills Covenant Church, the sides of which are emblazoned with a message of optimism for Christians:

“Those who HOPE in the Lord will renew their strength.”

But that tractor-trailer isn't, strictly speaking, a truck. It's a classroom.

Former Rolling Hills Covenant pastor Steve Bunyard in 2011 founded Re-Ignite Hope, a nonprofit that teaches folks who are down on the luck, including people who are homeless, how to weld — a potentially lucrative blue-collar career. Since then, the organization has boomed. It now boasts a 6,000 square-foot headquarters in Gardena, with 15 welding stations.

And recently, Bunyard received permission from the Rolling Hills Estates church to park the truck there and conduct hands-on welding classes twice weekly in his shiny new “Mobile Welding Training Center.”



To conduct the free 16-week Tuesday and Wednesday classes, Bunyard stands inside the front of the lengthy trailer on an up-raised platform armed with a marking pen and easel. To his right, eight welding stations are hidden behind thick plastic red curtains. On the left, 10 folding chairs are staggered in the little hallway across from the welding stations, where students sit for Bunyard's daily briefings and debriefings.

“We can train up to 24 at a time in a non-COVID scenario, but right now we're only doing 10,” Bunyard said, referring to the coronavirus pandemic and social distancing requirements. “All we need now is a parking area, because we furnish our own gas, electricity and restroom.”

Bunyard and the church's local outreach team recently collaborated with management staff at Harbor Hills, a low-income housing site in Lomita, to see if the welding school on wheels was a good fit for any of their residents.

Jeroll Rodgers, who works in Youth Development Services for Harbor Hills, said when the opportunity to join the Re-Ignite Hope program cropped up, about 30 residents showed an interest in earning their certification.

The Harbor Hills staff worked as a team, Rodgers said, to identify people they trusted who would start and complete the program.

Out of those 30, about 18 were interviewed. After that, eight students were chosen to begin the April inaugural training in the mobile unit.

“The Re-Ignite Hope program is a once in a lifetime opportunity to make more than \$100,000 a year,” Rodgers said. “With the Mobile Welding Training Center, resources are already in place.”

Blanca Alvarez, 35, who lost her job at Home Goods during the pandemic said starting the class was a life changer for her.

With two teenaged boys, Alvarez needed to find another means of support, she said. Alvarez recently said she was thankful for the program.

“The staff at Re-Ignite Hope are very homey, and make us feel welcome,” Alvarez said about two weeks into program. “They’re patient, and any question is a good question. I told my boys, and they are telling all their friends about me.”

So far, there is only one mobile unit, but other organizations are interested in the program at large.

Currently, Re-Ignite Hope, a Christian facility, has helped establish welding schools in Philadelphia, the Philippines and Brazil. And schools may soon appear in Dallas and Las Vegas as well, Bunyard said. The graduation rate is about 90%, with students finding jobs immediately after becoming certified.

The warden at the Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility in San Diego wants the Mobile Training Center to visit and present welding courses to inmates re-entering society, Bunyard said. The prison authorities were going to give Re-Ignite Hope a whole building at the facility.



But now Re-Ignite Hope doesn't need the building — because they have the spiffy new trailer.

“The warden told me if an inmate gets out of prison without a job skill, 87% of them will come back,” Bunyard said.

If they get out with a job skill, though, the recidivism rate drops to 13%

Re-Ignite hope, however, will start new classes next month in the parking lot of one of its partners, Grace Community Services, a Fullerton nonprofit. Also in the works is a possible training class in the parking lot of the USS Iowa, in San Pedro, for veterans who are having trouble getting jobs, Bunyard said.

There is a waiting list but, Bunyard said, he would never discourage anyone from filling out an application from their website. Folks are screened with heavy consideration toward dire necessity and those who seem the most motivated.

Jessica Bottomley, one of Re-Ignite's welding coaches in the Mobile Training Center, said she has coped with learning disabilities her whole life. But everyone connected with the welding school helped her gain her certifications.

“In the Gardena shop, Steve has a sign with the 10 things a person can do that require no talent,” Bottomley said recently. “Like showing up on time, always having a good attitude, or keeping your work area clean — if you do those things, it will show your employer, even if you are a slow learner, you can be a good employee.”

She looked around the bustling trailer, amid the buzz of welding activity.

“There is no question Steve's heart is to serve the people of this community,” Bottomley said, “and I appreciate his vision.”

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