

# Homeless Youth Look to the Future

## Work experience helps teens handle adult challenges



Pierre's Place café on Fifth Avenue in downtown San Diego is just the sort of homey spot to curl up with a good book on a rainy morning.

In the small kitchen, young people work with a peaceful focus, setting up workstations and drawing perfectly blended coffees from the espresso machine with a hiss of steamy milk. The workers, in their late teens and early 20s, are getting ready for the daily rush, placing homemade gourmet pizzas into a giant oven, and preparing salads, soups and sandwich makings. The feeling is one of an extremely well organized family kitchen in the home of a great cook. For these young adults, it is a family kitchen and this is their home. Pierre's Place is the "family" business of the Toussaint Academy of the Arts and Sciences, a boarding school for homeless youth.

Pierre's Place is the brainchild of Rick Newmyer, the director of Toussaint Youth Villages, which runs both the Toussaint Academy and Pierre's Place. Newmyer, who grew up in a restaurant family, suggested running Pierre's Place as a family business.

Knowing the ins and outs of running a restaurant, Newmyer was intrigued by the potential learning opportunities: everything from good work habits and financial literacy to business and nutrition planning to job training for specific restaurant positions. Most importantly, perhaps a restaurant could support Toussaint's students as they move into the working world.

Like any family business, the restaurant operates on the hopes and hard work of family members. In the case of Pierre's Place, all profits are put into scholarships and enrichment programs at Toussaint Youth Villages.

“The kids know that the more money they make, the more services they have,” Newmyer says, “and that’s in addition to getting paid for their work.”



Pierre’s Place is just one of many programs in San Diego supporting the efforts of homeless youth as they transition to the adult world. Two additional secondary schools in San Diego’s Hope Region program provide education and job training to an estimated 80 homeless teens in San Diego.

Joel Garcia is vice principal of the Hope Region, which runs the Monarch School, and provides educational opportunities for homeless youth in grades three to 12 and beyond. Garcia says that in the last seven years, federal laws have made it easier for homeless families to enroll their children in school.

“The McKinney-Vento Act of 2001 made it easier to enroll in school without shot records or proof of residence,” Garcia says. “The more time students are in school, the more stable their lives will be.”

The Monarch and Toussaint schools work hard to prepare students for success upon graduation.

“A lot of preparation takes place while students are enrolled in our programs,” Garcia says. “Our goal is to give every child the opportunity to go to college. When a student chooses to go to college, the door is wide open.”

Both Toussaint Academy and Monarch find ways to provide scholarships to graduating students who are ready to continue on to college. The nonprofit Monarch School Project offers students help with rent, bus passes and more. Board of Governor’s grants help cover college tuition.

Pierre’s Place is one of many programs that allow students to support their own scholarships. Currently, 90 percent of Toussaint Academy graduates continue on to college.

Several years ago, Toussaint made a transition from using a more institutional approach

to homeless youth in its incarnation as the Toussaint Teen Center, to the more family-centric model of the renamed Toussaint Academy.

“Look at where most successful young adults come from,” Newmyer says. “They come from families. We use grandma’s logic: what do parents provide for their children? They provide them with sports, arts, music.” They also provide them with expectations of college attendance.

“We told our students that we would support anyone who wanted to go to college,” Newmyer says, which means he does a whole lot of fundraising. Toussaint graduates have attended the University of California Santa Cruz, USD, Hofstra University, SDSU, National University and a variety of community colleges, all supported by generous scholarships.

But Toussaint’s support, just like the support of a real parent, doesn’t stop with college. Newmyer cites statistics that suggest that most families continue to support their young people in one way or another until the child is 27 years old, whether it is with rent money, actual lodging, an occasional meal or just moral and emotional support. Newmyer intends to offer that same sense of unwavering support to graduates of Toussaint.

“We raise 10,000 dollars a year,” says Newmyer, “and we are always looking for more money. I never want [our students] to have to drop a class because they can’t afford school or rent. The social expectation is that everyone is going to go to college.”

Monarch and Toussaint schools also offer job skills that will see youth through the transitional years to self-supporting adulthood.

Monarch works with local career training programs that train young people in job skills in such marketable areas as plumbing and auto body repair. Pierre’s Place offers high-level training for food service jobs.



Toussaint students can begin working at Pierre's Place in their final year of high school. Until they graduate, their work hours are limited so as not to undermine their studies. Each employee begins as an intern, working part-time at higher-than-minimum wages for 90 calendar days until they have learned good work habits and job skills. After 90 days, they can—and usually are—taken on as regular employees, earning industry standard restaurant wages.

Jobs are open to anyone who has ever lived or gone to school at Toussaint. By age 16, Toussaint's students are expected to hold down part-time jobs of a shift or two each week. Sixty percent of their earnings must be saved in an account that is set aside for their education or living expenses upon graduation. Students who leave the program without graduating forfeit some of that money to rent. Newmyer says most students complete the program, bringing the stability of a sizeable bank account, job skills and work ethics with them into the adult world.

Ryan Hudson and colleague Rose Najera, another Toussaint graduate, both work full-time and are saving their Pierre's Place earnings for college.

Najera's plans to attend San Diego City College will mean a transition to full-time school and part-time work.

"Education is more important now," Najera says, displaying the deep sense of purpose and faith in the future Newmyer hopes to instill in Toussaint's students.

For Toussaint students who arrive at the school with very little in their pockets, such a powerful work ethic and sense of hope and pride make them very rich indeed.

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