



Diving for Hope

Underwater welding program gives inmates a chance to build new lives

08:39 AM PST on Saturday, December 2, 2006

By PAIGE AUSTIN
The Press-Enterprise

CHINO - Underwater welding is one of the few high-paying, in-demand jobs available for a hard worker without a college or even high school diploma.

But it takes intense training. And its newest vocational program has an unusual admission requirement: Convicts only.

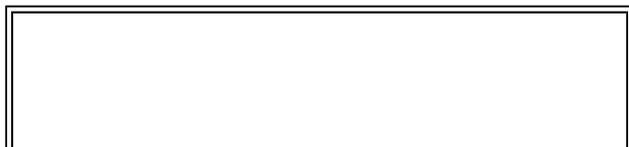
State leaders and inmates mingled Friday at the California Institution for Men's Leonard Greenstone Marine Technology Training Center dedication ceremony. The event was unusual for its gathering of press, corrections leaders and legislators behind prison walls. But what was most uncharacteristic for the prison setting was the palpable sense of pride and hope.

Corrections officials hope the one-of-a-kind program will be a vanguard class, saving the state millions of dollars and defying California's 70 percent recidivism rate, with most graduates staying out for good.

For many of the inmates, the class represents a second chance and an opportunity to prove themselves to their families.

Related

[Video: Inmates learn underwater welding at the California Institution for Men in Chino](#)



"It's already changed my life because of the discipline it requires and the pride it gives you," said Jim Childress, a 46-year-old diver from Los Angeles.



Caitlin M. Kelly / The Press-Enterprise

Chris Snow repairs a pipeline in a 12-foot tank Friday during a demonstration at California Institution for Men in Chino.

Three years into his second prison stint for drug dealing, Childress plans to get out and stay out.

The oldest diver in the class, lost 20 pounds because of the daily runs, swims, and push-ups. He hopes to earn about \$13,000 a month working underwater in construction, dam repair, harbor diving, or offshore oil drilling after he gets out in 2008. The many dangers of the job aren't a deterrent, he said.

"I'm more afraid of the street sharks. You have a better chance of getting hurt on the streets of Los Angeles than you do diving," he said. "At least this

way you can depend on your own ability to make it work, and you're not destroying peoples' lives and your own in the process."

A prison diving program was first established in 1970 by Prison Industry Board Vice Chair Leonard Greenstone.

For 33 years, the commercial dive-school graduates at the Chino prison maintained recidivism rates between 6 percent and 12 percent compared with the 70 percent statewide average.

However, the program was eliminated during budget cuts in 2003.

"That was shortsighted," said James Tilton, secretary of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. "We have to invest in more programs like this, proven to reduce recidivism."



Caitlin M. Kelly / The Press-Enterprise

"I guess it feels like being on the moon," says Chris Snow, 34, a

The 1½ month program costs \$350,000 to run, and churns out 100 graduates a year. It's a bargain, said Charles Pattillo of the Prison Industry Authority.

former bartender, of underwater welding.

If even a modest majority of the inmates stay out of prison after release, the program will save the state millions of dollars a year, he said.

Eligible inmates must have between 14 months and four years left to serve, and they must pass physical tests and demonstrate abilities in mechanics, physics and math.

Once through the program, the inmates have a shot at earning more than \$100,000 a year.

"It saved my life," said 1971 inmate graduate Dennis Asher. "I made more money diving than I ever did as a safecracker."

Before diving, Asher had been in and out of the system, starting at age 13. "Like most of these guys, I was an adrenaline junkie," he said. "Diving, you still get the rush, and you can earn enough to support a family."

Today, his daughter is an officer at the Chino prison that changed his life.

On Friday morning, inmate diver Chris Snow donned an 80-pound Yokohama diving suit and jumped into a 12-foot tank for a pipeline repair demonstration.

"I guess it feels like being on the moon," he said, using the diver communication system to field questions underwater. Snow, a 34-year-old former bartender from San Diego, said he's working to make his family proud.

"I want to show my parents and my loved ones that I can make money and live life."

Reach Paige Austin at 951-893-2106 or paustin@PE.com

Online at:

http://www.pe.com/localnews/inland/stories/PE_News_Local_B_dive02.67774d.ht