

## The future is green, at-risk youths learn

By Rachel Raskin-Zrihen/

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Malik Muhammad, a member of VallejoOs Green Team, wipes down the solar panels on the roof of City Hall during a visit Thursday to see how the system works. (Chris Riley/Times-Herald)

None of them had ever seen solar panels before, so getting up close to the ones on the roof of Vallejo's City Hall on Thursday was a learning experience for the five young men on the Green Team.

Part of Campfire USA Empire Council's Green Flame program, the Green Team aims to help disenfranchised youth make inroads into green tech industries, program director Kalid Meky said. It's "a green lifeline" for these 18- to 24-year-olds, he said.

"We're cleaning the panels and then coming back to do it monthly on a volunteer basis," he said. "The point is the hands-on training. If it gets in the paradigm of their thinking, it's the first step in going toward that type of career."

The next step is to start a solar panel cleaning business, and then to learn to sell and install them, Meky said.

The message seems to be getting through to participants like Chief Bell of Vallejo.

The 24-year-old father of a 3-day-old named Hope said he was laid off from a local refinery and hopes to find a "green" career. "I have to take care of my daughter," he said. "At first it was just about finding a job, but now I really want to help save the Earth. I hope to be able to help do that by getting into a career installing solar panels."

Orlando Johnson, 19, said before he decided to learn about green building technologies, he wasn't really doing much of anything. Now he said he thinks he may have found an appropriate career path.

"I've always been good working with my hands, and it keeps me off the streets," the Vallejo native said.

Vallejo residents Ricardo Savage, 23, and Brandon Kelly, 19, said they were also without direction before signing on to the Green Team.

"I was on unemployment before this, and before that, I worked at Six Flags Discovery Kingdom," Savage said. "I hope this helps me get a career."

Vallejo resident Malik Muhammad, 20, said he's traded "working on my music and hanging out" for learning about green technology, and he has caught the bug.

"Even if this doesn't work, I want to find a green job," he said. "I enjoy this. I like building things and helping the environment."

Public Works supervisor Dwayne Wood gave the team a tour of the converter area in City Hall's basement -- the "brains" of the operation -- where the sunshine hitting the roof is turned into energy. They learned, among other things, that it's a very loud process.

"It powers the building and anything left over can be sold back to PG&E," building maintenance worker Tom Davenport said.

Though that hasn't happened yet, the \$2.7 million worth of city-owned solar panels in Vallejo are paying for themselves in savings, Wood said.

There are panels atop City Hall, the John F. Kennedy Library and the Corporation Yard, which helps power the Vallejo Police Department. And there's a small solar farm on Columbus Parkway that helps run some of the water department's pumps, he said.

There are 4,018 panels all told and the city paid under \$2 million for the project. The rest came in the form of PG&E incentives, he said.

First installed in 2002, and replaced by the manufacturer last year for free because of an undisclosed flaw, the panels have a 50-year lifespan, Wood said.

Meky and Campfire USA Empire Council board president Maxine Box, who accompanied the group and told the young men not to "let the streets get you," said they believe green technology is the "wave of the future." They said they hope to convince these men and others like them to get in on the ground floor, so to speak. For most, it's a last chance, Meky said.

"I'm telling them to take advantage of this green wave to find a way to support your family," Meky said. "If you can see it, you can be it. If we can imagine society being run in some way other than with drilling dirty oil, then we can do it."

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