
Warehouse work offers a second chance

■ Men of Valor job trainees learn skills while providing hard work

By Cecily Burt

STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND — Donte Thompson has known trouble in his life, much of it of his own making.

Not anymore, he says.

Thompson, 32, and three other graduates of the Men of Valor job training program are working steadily these days on a large construction salvage project at the former Oakland Army Base.

"I heard it was a place for people trying to get their life back on track," Thompson said about his decision to enroll in the Men of Valor construction job training program at Acts Full Gospel Church in East Oakland. "Off and on, a good part of my life has been spent on the inside" — the inside being jail, prison or California Youth Authority lockups.

Men of Valor is a job- and life-skills training program for ex-felons or young men who are trying to turn their lives around.

Thompson joined the program in February and now he's working for Zaccor Companies of Alameda to deconstruct a massive World War II-era warehouse at the former base.

Scott Klopf, Zaccor's general manager, admitted he was less than enthused when he heard he'd have to work with a nonprofit for local hiring on the Army Base job, not having had the best

experiences with such arrangements in the past. But his angst didn't last long.

He found that the men had been well-prepped for the workforce and they are all doing very well on the job, he said.

"They are very capable and willing trainees," Klopf said. "We've provided them with some site-specific training and safety training such as CPR and first aid, and off-site classroom training. They are getting hands-on experience with the inventory, stacking and banding of material and working around equipment. ... In controlled situations they're getting the opportunity to run a Bobcat."

After the warehouse job is finished, Klopf said the company will try to place the men as union apprentices at other job sites or find them a spot with another company. Their pay will decrease some while they build up hours and training, but they didn't seem to mind.

Chaunte Lamont Franklin, 34, can remember the day he joined Men of Valor — July 18, 2007 — because he said it was the turning point in his life.

"It was something I wanted to do to get my life back on track," he said, echoing a common theme. "I'd been in and out and just got tired of it."

Although both men have a strong support system of family, they said Bruce Cox had a lot to do with their success in the program, and in getting them to think about their future in a new way.

Cox, a contractor who runs the Men of Valor construction training program in East Oakland and another smaller construction training program in West Oakland, has become a mentor and father figure to both of them.

"He's a good dude," Thompson said.

Franklin helped Cox build a soul food restaurant at 64th Avenue and Foothill Boulevard "from the ground up." He also joined the Volunteers of America.

Jamal Gill, 31, had already worked a little in construction before joining Men of Valor in February. He hadn't been to prison, but he knows he was lucky.

"I was out in the life, not doing what I was supposed to do," Gill said. "I made a decision one day that I couldn't keep on. I seen what I was doing to my family, to myself. There comes a point where you have to make a change."

Gill is now enrolled at Heald College, majoring in business with emphasis in criminal justice. "At first I was looking at (becoming) a police officer, now I'm going back and forth between parole and corrections."

Dewayne Liles, a foreman for Zaccor, said the men have worked out very well.

"I like them a lot; they don't complain," he joked. "They are doing great, and I have no complaints at all."

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