

## **A second chance at success .**

By Jennifer Vigil, staff writer

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ENCANTO – It's not the type of exclamation you usually hear at a graduation.

“Where's my P.O.?” asked Adam Matschullat, using the shorthand for parole officer. “I told you I'd do it, right?”

Matschullat and his classmates had been accustomed to a path that involved judges and police officers, not guidance counselors and teachers. They hope that changed for good Friday, when they completed a course offered by Second Chance, an Encanto agency that aids the homeless and unemployed.

The 69 graduates, ranging from teens to those in their 50s, have battled drug problems and homelessness or racked up criminal records. Second Chance, however, offers them just that – an opportunity to learn life skills while complying with mandates from courts and other authorities.

The activities they practiced during three weeks of instruction – dressing appropriately, addressing others by name, greeting people with eye contact and a firm handshake – may seem like common sense. But for many of these people, bending to the rules of the workplace rather than those of the streets sometimes proved to be a challenge.

During their graduation, amid the cubicles at Second Chance's Imperial Avenue office and in front of about 200 friends, family members and supporters, each member of the group took a turn at the lectern.

Some said they were thankful that they had set aside their frustrations and overcome urges to quit the program.

Chance Ringo, 25, whose past includes drug dealing, gang activity and gun possession, said his attitude toward instructors initially was, “Can't nobody tell me nothing.”

Keith Donovan, 18, entered Second Chance to try to have a felony charge reduced to a misdemeanor. He likened his eight-hour-a-day lessons to “an obstacle course,” and said his biggest hurdle was having his handshake, previously limp, corrected.

Jerrod Mango, 37, in attendance after his fall arrest on suspicion of receiving stolen property, was ordered to write a 500-word essay because his cell phone rang during class, a no-no. He bolted in anger, but counselors intercepted him. Mango went on to direct the class video project.

Upon graduation, he called the course “an academy to get into life.” It's something his mother, Jane Seaman, hopes will end a decade of trouble for Mango, who has two felonies on his record, leaving him vulnerable to a lengthy prison sentence should he be convicted again.

“He's really told me: 'Mom, I am so done. I'm not going back to prison anymore,'” said Seaman, of Chula Vista. “I want to believe him. I don't have any reason not to.”

Scott Silverman, Second Chance's founder, knows how easily graduates can backslide. That's why they're required to check in as they try to find work. They're also encouraged to recruit three people to the program.

Silverman's original mission was to boost job skills for the indigent. Five years ago he made a push into the prison system, based on the premise that intervening before inmates are released increases their chances of success.

His agency operates on a \$2.9 million budget, about one-third of which comes from public funding. Silverman also has received grants from Rep. Bob Filner, D-San Diego, and the city to open a second classroom by early next year.

Two years ago, the average monthly class size was 30. Silverman said the goal is to jump to 100 and eventually expand the program beyond San Diego.

Silverman acknowledges that the people who receive his services have “certain life skills not appropriate to the workplace.” His instructors try to redirect that energy. Matschullat took that message to heart, courtesy of one of his counselors, Michael Rice.

“He told me (that) a lot of things I've done in the past I can do in a positive way,” Matschullat said. “Instead of selling dope, I can sell cars or sell houses.”