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Pittsburg educator works overtime for kids

By Rick Radin
Contra Costa Times

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PITTSBURG -- Veronica Pope doesn't just teach entrepreneurial skills. She puts them to work through her nonprofit start-up that teaches East Contra Costa youths how to get back on track after running afoul of the law or school rules.

Using the philosophy that there's no discipline like working for a living or running a business, Pope has her 14- to 20-year-olds running their own carwash and managing its income, stocking shelves and helping with janitorial chores at the Starbucks on Railroad Avenue.

Many of the youths in the program have been in trouble to varying degrees, from excessive tardiness in school to burglaries and auto theft.

Pope started the agency People Who Care in 2003 while working as a youth crisis intervention specialist in the Pittsburg school district.

Participants receive referrals from schools, school attendance boards, probation departments and juvenile courts, she said.

People Who Care had 103 participants last year, and Pope hopes to recruit about 150 this year.

"We were seeing so many kids assigned to community service, doing things like picking up trash," she said. "I thought, 'Why can't we make community service into a learning experience?'"

Pope received grants from Contra Costa mental health services and the Keller Canyon Mitigation Fund to start the nonprofit.

The first project was the ongoing Hip-Hop Car Wash, where students wash and detail cars using an eco-friendly waterless

solution in the parking lot of a Pittsburg auto parts store.

The carwash teaches skills such as serving customers, doing a job conscientiously, collecting and accounting for money, and learning the importance of water conservation, Pope said.

The project is also designed with the environment in mind by using solar panels to power the vacuum cleaners used to detail the cars.

The carwash operates Saturdays from March through October in the parking lot at 3745 Railroad Ave.

People Who Care's long-term goal is to build an automatic carwash using solar power for electricity.

The project serves as a model for teens to create their own businesses in the future, Pope said.

"They can start their own businesses and be entrepreneurs based on the models we're teaching," she said. "They just have to know that they have choices."

The People Who Care office on Railroad Avenue has 20 computers that the students use to work on business plans and job applications.

The agency also offers classes in anger management and conflict resolution to help students avoid the problems that got them into trouble in the first

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place.

"They like it because they aren't in school and being quizzed," Pope said. "We quiz them without them knowing they are being quizzed."

Antonio Rosalez, 18, has progressed from being a program participant to a paid student counselor.

He said People Who Care has helped him reconnect with his family after he became estranged over problems with drugs and fighting.

His probation officer recommended the program for his community service assignment, and since then he has improved his computer and writing skills, while helping to keep other kids on track.

Rafael Vasquez opted to join the program earlier this month after listening to a presentation at Riverside Continuation High School in Pittsburg.

"I'm interested in learning as much as I can about solar energy," said Vasquez, 17. "That part of what they talked about was what I liked."

Pope has identified solar power and green energy as an ideal opportunity for at-risk youths to develop careers.

Ecology-based field trips are key to raising awareness and exposing the students to different environments.

This year, students will be going to a wind-energy farm to talk with operators.

They also make an annual trip to the John Muir Historic Site in Martinez to see how operators maintain gardens in keeping with the ideas of the great conservationist.

"John Muir exposes children to the history of Contra Costa County, teaches about medicinal plants and those you can live off to create an eco-friendly vision for our environment," Pope said.

Pittsburg Councilwoman Nancy Parent has followed the project and credits Pope with "creating something from nothing" to benefit at-risk youth.

"I think that there are kids on the edge, and the earlier you can find them and give them some direction, the better off everybody is," she said.

Parent remembers visiting the People Who Care office on a holiday and seeing a student from Bay Point who had ridden his skateboard to Pittsburg to be there.

"Any kid who wants to be there that badly when he doesn't have to be has got to be doing something right," she said.

Contact Rick Radin at 925-779-7166.

VERONICA POPE

AGE: 54

HOMETOWN: Pittsburg

CLAIM TO FAME: Started and runs nonprofit People Who Care to help underprivileged East County youths get and stay on track for success in life.

QUOTE: "Not everyone can be the greatest soccer player or the greatest athlete, but you can make your mark in other ways."

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