

# All-in with the trades

*Santa Monica municipal programs produce training, jobs, and unanticipated benefits*

By Elizabeth Van Ness, EA Publisher

SANTA MONICA, CALIF.—It’s a beachfront community populated by glamorous “celebs” and rich retirees, so perhaps it’s not surprising that our stories sound a little “Hollywood” —

A tough street kid gives up a life of drugs, indolence and petty crime, because he prefers working construction and cleanup with the maintenance crew for his city’s “streets and fleets” department. Now his sweet smile lights up a room, and he practically jumps with excitement when he talks about his work.

A rich girl and a poor girl attend the same summer camp. At first they want nothing to do with each other, but after a few weeks, they’re best friends dressed alike in hard hats and goggles, working as welders, sliding down fire poles, and making furniture with jigsaws.

An electrician’s son has the smarts to be any kind of Silicon Valley exec — but he has a brighter idea. Soon he’s convinced a staff of government workers to help high school kids turn their own inspirations into community-



*Many roads are open, including this one, to Santa Monica youth who are fortunate enough to be selected for the city’s Trades Intern program. For them, street paving and other trades work is an almost literal path to a brighter future.* —City of Santa Monica photo

oriented businesses.

Or, perhaps this is the most heartwarming and compelling story of all: Various members of a small city government believe in themselves, their work, and their fellow citizens just enough to make those first three stories come true, not just three times but many times over.

## Meeting a need

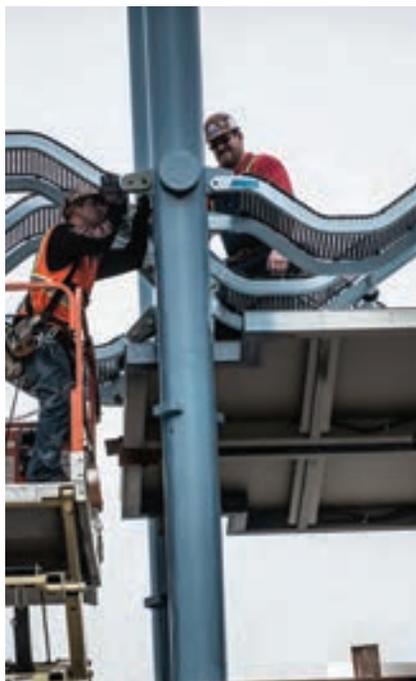
Romantic narration aside, the City of Santa Monica, California, has created a trio of successful jobs-related programs. And although the outcomes may seem stranger than fiction, both the results and the work itself are exceedingly practical, down-to-earth, and likely replicable.

Take for example the Trades Intern program at the city’s facilities department. Its origins are familiar: One of the most significant challenges shared by employers whose work involves tradespeople is the lack of skilled workers. At the same time, neighborhoods, communities and governments are challenged by the surplus of would-be-workers who lack both employment and skills. Figuring out how to square that circle has been difficult for almost everyone who’s thought about it.

Further, although in many cases people who have not found work have simply been unlucky (or, not in the right place at the right time), for

others the issues may go beyond basic unemployment. A history of drug abuse, a lack of education, an arrest record, financial problems, family conflicts, young parenthood, health challenges, and similar situations can make it difficult or nearly impossible for even an otherwise qualified person to convince an employer to take a

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*For those working as Trade Interns in Santa Monica, California, the sky is the limit!* —City of Santa Monica photo



*Rafael Ramos was accepted into the Trade Intern program, and two years later was hired as a streets service worker.*



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chance on him or her. These sorts of problems, too, can affect a person's confidence and optimism, and even result in self-destructive or self-sabotaging behavior, thereby extending one cycle of bad news into another of even worse news.

The results have consequences for the community, as well as for the individual, because a person without work is more likely to worry public welfare, health and safety systems.

In response to these predicaments, the City of Santa Monica has come up with a plan that provides training, employment, and incentives for an individual's continued progress, and is offering that opportunity to a few young people who might otherwise never have a good chance at a steady job.

### **The Trades Intern Program**

The program itself is an application-based opportunity. Young men and women, 18-30, are invited to apply for a two year internship. During the two years they do the work of city crews



in various city departments working alongside experienced employees, but typically performing the least appealing work at hand. They lay asphalt, pave gutters, replace huge light bulbs overhanging the freeway, and, quite possibly, clean public restrooms. They generally end their workday stiff, sore and a little exhausted, but they are paid well (\$15/hour) and they receive full health benefits.

Be aware that these interns are required to do more than simply show up for tough manual labor, on time and with a good attitude – although that is indeed an absolute requirement. They must stay off drugs and out of trouble, enroll in a goal-oriented educational program, and fulfill various other pledges and responsibilities.

Then when their two year internship ends, they are not guaranteed a job; in fact they are told firmly that a permanent job with the city is extremely unlikely. According to Sylvester Mabry, the city's Street & Fleet services manager, it's not unusual for four or five

hundred applicants to respond to a single job posting. However, exiting interns are not necessarily out of luck. In addition to the significant on-the-job training they've received, they are provided with resume building, references, and other resources which will make their post-internship job search far easier. By then they've attended dozens of Wednesday morning meetings which have helped them address core issues: personal responsibility, social skills, financial planning, and other "soft" accomplishments that make not only job hunting but life itself a more secure, gentle and peaceful experience.

Rafael Ramos is one of the rare interns who did receive a job with the city. He now works with "Streets and Fleets," and credits the intern experience with "changing his life." According to Mike Suhd, regional occupational Program instructor for maintenance management occupations, Rafael was a "stellar" intern, and is now an equally brilliant full time employee. "He wanted to learn every piece of equipment we had from day one," remembers Mabry,





Rosie's Girls learn welding, carpentry and other trades under the supervision of experienced city employees —William Short photo

to the laughter of other city executives who remember Ramos' enthusiasm and diligence with bemused amazement. During his internship he earned certifications from OSHA, Commonwealth Edison, and the Department of Water and Power; he also received his Class A driver's license.

If anything might said to be missing from this seemingly perfect program, it is perhaps a greater number of individual participants. In March 2015, eight men and one woman were in the coveted program.

**The work of the City**

The City of Santa Monica's Facilities and Maintenance department is a division within the Public Works department,, governed by the Santa Monica City Council and administered by sev-

eral city executives. The annual budget is about \$14 million for facilities maintenance, \$40 million for public works.

The department is responsible for all City-owned sites, including the airport, city cemetery, and the famed Santa Monica Pier. Public facilities are an additional responsibility: city Hall, the public Safety Facility, park buildings, public restrooms, aquatic facilities, and community centers.

The work is what you might expect: maintenance, repair, and construction. Departments and trades include carpentry, electrical, fleet maintenance, HVAC, irrigation, landscaping, painting, plumbing, street maintenance, and welding.

There is a work order system that assigns tasks by trade, directly to leads

and line staff. Quite a percentage of the work is outsourced to third parties, but the city crews have significant, ongoing responsibilities that require skill, diligence, energy, attention to detail, cognizance of safe and good practices, and significant social skills.

The fact that work is outsourced is a boon to the interns, because the third party contractors face the same shortage of workers that was acknowledged earlier in this article. According to Michael Jackson who recruits applicants for the internships, and Devin Starnes, facilities maintenance manager, quite a few of the interns have found work with outside contractors who perform services for the city. This is a priority for Starnes and all of the intern mentors.

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Typical classroom? Engagement and interaction are the norm in Youth Tech Program sessions.

—William Short photo

At left - city crews use huge equipment and big vehicles to complete important projects. Rafael Ramos comments, "We operate tractors, dump trucks, just everything you see as a little kid that opens your eyes and you get the 'wow' effect. So now I'm a part of that and it's a beautiful thing." —City of Santa Monica photo



The Trades Intern leadership team with one of their success stories - Michael Jackson, Sylvester Mabry, Trades Intern Marcello Santo, Mike Suhd, and Devin Starnes

# It takes a village...

According to the leaders of the Trades Intern program, participants there are motivated primarily by: “work.” Whether their focus is on the salary, or the sense of security, or the presence of purpose, in most cases, for those interns, the simple reality of a job that is really, truly theirs is, in and of itself, reason enough to celebrate and take part.

In two other Santa Monica programs, the motivators are somewhat different. . . .

## Rosie’s Girls

It’s a summer camp for girls, grade 6-8, that immerses them in the work of the City of Santa Monica. Equipped with their own toolkits and personal protective gear (hardhats, goggles), they shadow city workers to learn carpentry, welding, firefighting, and even tv camera work. Families who can afford the full fee, about \$500/week (it is somewhat less for residents of the city) are effectively subsidizing campers who receive financial aid; as a result the group of campers is socio-economically diverse. Games and activities emphasize self-esteem and social interaction as well as the trades skills.

## Youth Tech

It’s a collaborative effort with Santa Monica’s growing numbers of “Silicon Beach” tech companies, designed to encourage local technical talent and the development of a skilled high tech labor force in the city. Participants (mostly post-high school students) spend a week learning about the extensive and sophisticated internet technology that connects all city operations: city hall offices, traffic lights, water usage, libraries, schools, etc. Next, students form teams and launch a business from scratch. In the process they learn programming code and business concepts.

## . . . but there are some common outcomes

As humans experience new environments and skills, they typically gain appreciation for what they are learning ... and it seems like the City of Santa Monica has figured out how to make the most of that phenomenon. By funding and fostering these programs, it has not only improved individual lives, it has also nurtured, in each of those lives, an appreciation of the community these city residents call home, and an equal appreciation of the people who make that city what it is.



Olivia Botello and Brooke Lyon, Rosie’s Girls. Brooke is a former Rosie’s Girl who now helps Olivia run the program. “It makes you a different person,” says Brooke, “in a good way, by using tools like that. It really gives you that empowering feeling.”



Jamila Haji and Gary Carter, Youth Tech Program. Gary would like to see the program grow, as to the number of student participants, the funding available, and the number of potential corporate internships for students who have completed the program.