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## SHARING OPPORTUNITIES



Andy Holzman Staff Photographer

Llamas Plastics Inc. owner Ozzie Llamas talks with interns James Bell and Calen Martin. Llamas is working with Hathaway-Sycamores vocational internship program to help emancipated foster youths.

# MOLDING A BRIGHTER FUTURE

The owner of a factory in Sylmar has given emancipated foster youths jobs to help them build better lives

By Susan Abram Staff Writer

**S**YLMAR — Calen Martin takes two trains and a bus each morning to get to his factory job in Sylmar.

For eight hours each day, Martin, 19, melts, molds, and smooths plastic, transforming the material into windows used on airplanes.

It's hard work, Martin says, but he loves what he sees in himself.

"When I first started here, I didn't really understand the importance of something until I saw the work behind it," said Martin, an emancipated foster youth who has worked at Llamas Plastics for the last four months.

"I found balance."

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## JOBS

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Martin is one of several emancipated foster youths who is part of Hathaway-Sycamores Child and Family Services' vocational internship program, which places young men and women who have aged out of foster care into paid internships. The agency, a provider of children's mental-health services in Los Angeles County, uses money from a grant from the Carl and Roberta Deutsch Foundation to pay the teens throughout the nine-month internship.

So far, the three-year-old program has placed more than 60 former foster youths in jobs at the Ronald McDonald House Charities, Sony Pictures Imageworks, Smart & Final, T.J. Maxx, Party City and Skechers.

Earlier this year, Oswaldo "Ozzy" Llamas invited four emancipated foster youths to come work in his plastics factory. Founded in 1978, Llamas Plastics manufactures aeronautical products such as windshields and canopies for commercial and military aircraft.

Llamas said he liked the idea of helping young people find a job, especially foster youths, because he understands their difficult pasts. He sees a little of himself in them: their hard expressions that mask tender hearts, the need to be seen and to be heard.

"One of the reasons I feel for these kids is my dad was kind of crazy and he left when I was 4," Llamas said.



Andy Holzman Staff Photographer

Ozzie Llamas, talking with James Bell, grew up in a poor area in Colombia, which inspires him to help youths.

"He would forget to send money and there were times when the family went from a poor house to an even poorer house."

Llamas can look back on his childhood knowing he forged a future. Now 82, he wants to help young people step into their future, too.

Nationwide, emancipated foster youths experience higher rates of unemployment, incarceration and undereducation. Recent statistics from organizations that support foster youth in Los Angeles County say that nearly 50 percent of 18-year-olds who leave foster care will be homeless within six months.

"We want to provide a real life experience for them and pair them with someone who understands that this is going to be a journey together," said Robert Myers, an executive vice president with Hathaway-Sycamores.

Llamas, who had donated

toys to children and teens through Hathaway-Sycamores for 25 years, came to mind.

"He was a great fit," Myers said.

But it's up to the youths to maintain that job, and sometimes it doesn't work out. For many, the internship is their first employment experience.

"The best part of this is seeing their confidence grow," said Rick Llamas, who, with his sister Cindy Smith, works alongside his father.

James Bell, 22, has been working at Llamas Plastics for eight months. He's living on his own and happily independent, he said, and the father of a month-old daughter.

"I'd never worked in a factory before," Bell said. "I never ever knew how hard it was to make a window."

But he learned and he plans to save his money.

"I want to have my own business," he said.

"Then you can hire me,"

Ozzy Llamas shot back.

Born in Colombia, Llamas said his father was a physician who was committed to finding a cure for schizophrenia. He remembers the mentally ill patients who visited his father's clinic and the images of straitjackets that were used. But his father's commitment to finding a cure often led him to leave and forget his family.

Left alone one Christmas, Llamas sold his school books for money to buy eggs for his mom, a rag doll for his sister, and a tennis ball for himself.

He said he befriended the street children of Bogota, and remembers how the orphans slept under advertisement posters on sidewalks and stole to buy food.

"They were tough," Llamas said of those he calls the children of the street. "When you're in that situation, you don't take (crap) from nobody."

Llamas immigrated to the United States when he was 18 and enlisted in the Army. He served during the Korean War, earned college degrees and went to work in the local aerospace industry.

He later developed exclusive machinery including a giant, merry-go-round piece known as the stretcher, that expands plastic.

Those children of the street in Bogota always come to mind, he said, which is why he wants to help emancipated foster youth.

"I relate to these kids," Llamas said. "But I went to school and that saved my life."

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