

✓ CF JAILS RD 2/28/92 p. 13

Prisoners learn to put their 'time' to good use

Job-training program gives inmates skills for outside

By EMILIO ALVARADO
STAFF WRITER

At the Santa Cruz County Detention Center, inmates don't have time to do time — they're too busy learning a trade.

For more than half of the nearly 200 inmates at the Watsonville center, their days are filled with classes in one of several trades. They choose among such courses as word processing, carpentry, auto body repair and upholstery. If academics are what they want, the Watsonville Adult School provides instructors who teach English as a second language and help inmates prepare for the GED, or high-school equivalency tests.

The vocational schools are run by the Santa Cruz County Office of Education's Regional Occupation Program. ROP director Larry Edler said the classes at the center are but a few of nearly 60 offered by ROP throughout the county. The classes at the center, he said, were started in the mid-1970s.

Without the training inmates get at the center, their time in jail would be wasted and they wouldn't learn anything of practical use, Edler said.

"All they'd learn is how to pick up cigarette butts along the highway," said Edler, who has been with ROP since it started in 1965.

The program in Santa Cruz County was the first to open in the state, he said.

The auto-body school at the center is run by Tom Alejo, a man who has spent 22 years in the business of taking wrecked heaps and converting them into sparkling jewels. For the past eight years, he has tried to do the same with the hundreds of inmates who have passed through his shop.

"Some people come here with a third-grade education, they'd been working in the fields, there isn't much hope," he said.

Their future, he said, is often clouded and uncertain. But he thinks inmates have a fighting chance of staying out of jail if they take a trade with them when they leave the center.

After finishing Alejo's 70-hour course, inmates get a certificate

and a brand-new 150-piece tool set.

"It's a big deal for them," Alejo said. "It's something very positive for them."

One of his former students is now working in a San Jose auto-body shop making \$26 an hour, Alejo said.

Cars for the body-shop course come from all over the county. The customers pay for the supplies used and are charged a small fee for labor, usually \$2 a hour. The money is used to pay for supplies and buy tool sets for those who complete the course.

But Alejo said the shop is not looking for customers. It is "swamped," he said, and he has a long waiting list of customers.

Last year, a 1950 Ford convertible that was refurbished at the shop won first prize at the Beach Street Revival, an annual car show held in Watsonville. The candy-apple-red Ford was dubbed "Rehab Ruby," he said. The prize was added to the list of awards his students have won in the past few years for customizing cars.

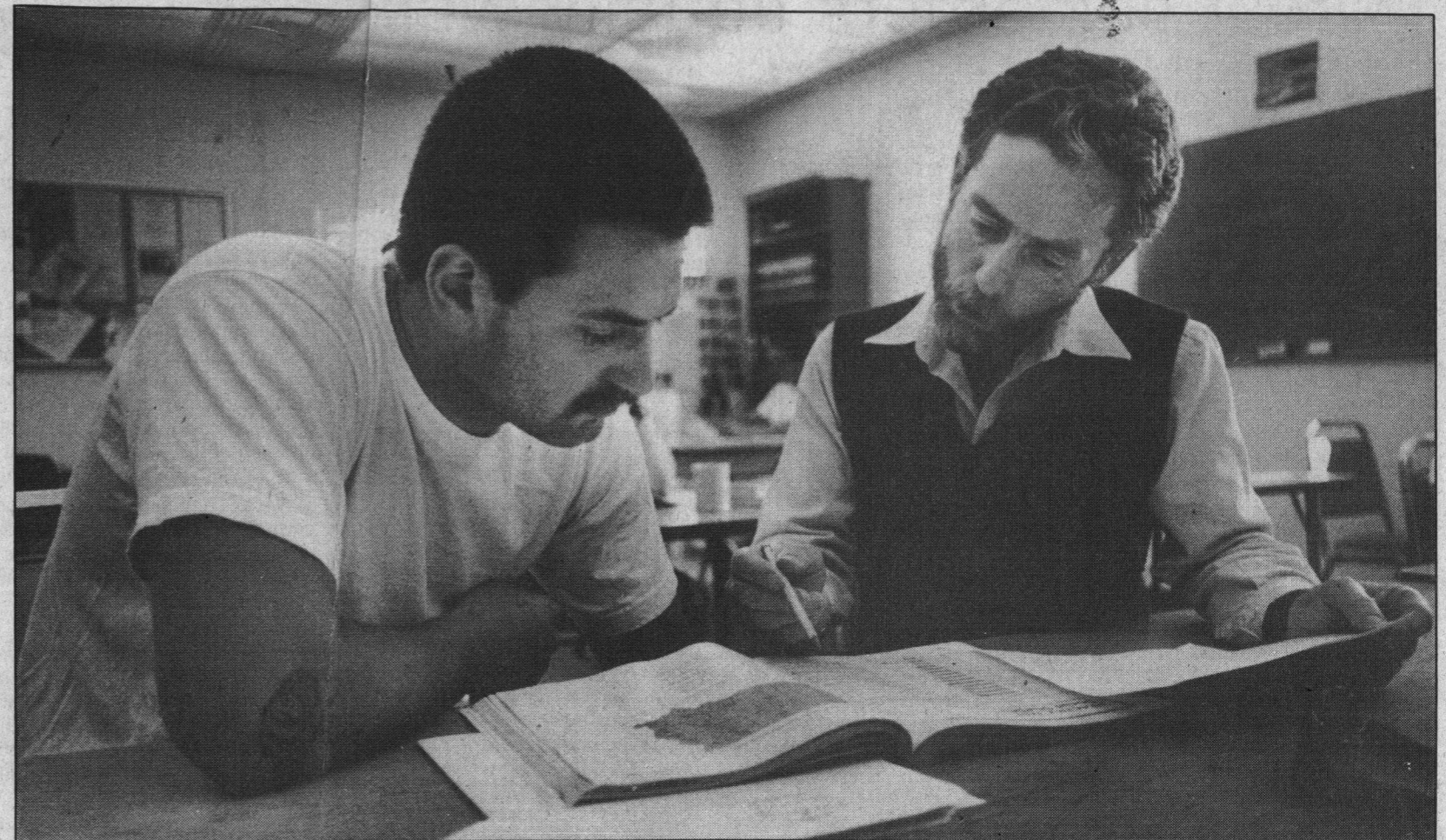
Both the upholstery and carpentry shops also do jobs for the public, but they try to limit the number of jobs. Carpentry students do most of the construction work at the center and have built cabinets for county buildings. Upholstery students work on a few pieces of furniture, but they concentrate on car interiors.

Inmates can attend day or evening GED and English classes. They can also use the classroom to study other subjects.

One inmate this week was studying for his Class A commercial driving license. Richard De La Paz, whose last name in Spanish means Of The Peace, was in the classroom reviewing a study guide in preparation for the state exam.

He was taking a short break from his studies and had placed his Bible over the study guide and was reading from the book of Psalms.

De La Paz said he came to the center last month after being sentenced for grand theft and fighting with his ex-girlfriend's boyfriend. Although he is not due for release



Mike McCollum

Inmate Joey Setterberg, left, studies for his high-school equivalency test with teacher Brent Pitman.

until October, he will leave the center in a week to go to a Christian drug and alcohol rehabilitation program in Santa Cruz.

He said he has been in and out of "the system" since 1977. The center, he said, "gives a man an opportunity to learn something." Having had a taste of other jails, De La Paz prefers the center.

"If you can't make it in a place like this, they have other places," he said. "It beats the main (Santa Cruz County) jail."

ROP is not just at the center. It offers classes at many other locations, including every high school in the county except Aptos High, because there is no place to hold classes there, Edler said.

The program has a budget of nearly \$3 million, Edler said. Last year, the program had 4,599 students whose ages ranged from the mid-teens to the mid-50s.

ROP classes, free and open to anyone, cover a wide range of subjects, including cooking, dental hygiene and video production.

At the center, ROP has a chance of making the biggest impact on people's lives, said sheriff's Lt. Mark Tracy. Tracy supervises the operation of the center, which is rated as minimum security.

Tracy said many of the inmates are repeat offenders sentenced for such crimes as drunk driving and drug use. But the center has a few inmates serving sentences for violent crimes. The average sentence is about six months, he said.

Getting job training while at the center may make the difference between becoming a ward of the state or a productive member of society, Tracy said. But not every inmate at the main jail qualifies to be transferred to the center.

Inmates go through a "classification" process to determine who would be appropriate for the center, Tracy said. Jail officials review inmates' criminal records, their propensity to commit violent acts while incarcerated, their past record of drug use at the jail, and

whether they have ever attempted to escape.

If they are deemed "low risk," they are transferred to the center, Tracy said. Moving prisoners to the center, he said, also alleviates crowding at the jail, which had 382 prisoners yesterday. It is designed to house 224 prisoners.

Inmate population at the women's jail in Santa Cruz averages 23. Yesterday it held 19. Because the average population is low and average sentences run 90 days, establishing vocational training programs at the women's jail is difficult, Tracy said.

Providing vocational training for women prisoners is something the county is "working on," Tracy said. The women's jail does provide some services to women, though. It has a contract with the Santa Cruz City School District, which provides a teacher for GED classes. A variety of self-help groups come to the jail several times a week to conduct meetings. A member of Prisons Arts, a non-

profit organization of artists, conducts crafts classes, and women can make such things as earrings and painted T-shirts.

There is a plan under discussion to release women several hours a day to attend an ROP cosmetology school in Santa Cruz, Tracy said.

But establishing vocational training at the women's jail is a different matter. It usually takes 10 to 15 students to start a class, Tracy said. With such a low number of women at any given time at the jail, it is hard to start training programs.

"The women can't be forgotten," Tracy said, "but it's really tough."

At the men's center, aside from the vocational training, there is also a host of pets, including six cats and seven peacocks. The idea, Tracy said, is for inmates to "bond" with the animals. Pets, he said, have a way of appealing to the gentler side of people.

"Sometimes you see a guy all tattooed up petting a cat in his arms," Tracy said.