

Workers' retraining program honored

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2/19/92

SANTA CRUZ — A Santa Cruz County job retraining program that helped hundreds of displaced Pillsbury/Green Giant Co. food plant workers find new careers has been honored with a prestigious national award.

Careerworks, a division of the county Human Resources Agency, is the recipient of the National Alliance of Business "Distinguished Adult Job Training Program of the Year" award for 1992. The honor is considered the governmental equivalent of an Academy award.

The retraining program was set into motion in April of 1990 after Pillsbury/Green Giant shifted much of its food-processing efforts from Watsonville to Mexico. More than 300 workers were left jobless by the move, and 93 percent enlisted for retraining, with most of the remaining 7 percent opting to retire.

The former Green Giant workers — of whom 45 percent spoke Spanish as their primary language — were given training in English, automobile repair, office and medical-office skills, building maintenance and computing. Six participants earned their high-school diplomas, and others attended Cabrillo College.

The program, now in its final phase of training 50 clients who needed more extensive language and occupational training, has placed 81 percent of its participants into new jobs, with an average wage of slightly more than \$8 an hour.

Financing came from a variety of public and private sources, including a state grant and more than \$75,000 from the Greater Santa Cruz Community Foundation. The Green Giant Co. contributed matching funds. Much of the money was used to provide for clients' housing needs while they learned new jobs.

Sergio Lopez, general manager of the local Teamsters union that represented many of the displaced workers and a member of the management committee that set strategies for the retraining, said the program worked well "under the circumstances. ...

"It did an excellent job in providing training. However, in today's economy, the benefits and jobs that the people are going into are not comparable to what they had before," said Lopez.

Employment