

Camps or 'warehouses'?

CYA dilemma sparks debate on how to treat juvenile lawbreakers

By MARIA GAURA
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BEN LOMOND — James Rodriguez was 16 years old when he was arrested for assault with a deadly weapon and sentenced to the California Youth Authority, the state's prison program for young offenders.

The former Los Angeles gang member, now 18, was released on parole Wednesday from the CYA's Ben Lomond Youth Conservation Camp. Rodriguez has done time in both a locked institution and the minimum-security Ben Lomond camp on Empire Grade, and he says camp life has given him skills to survive in the outside world.

"I asked for a transfer here because I wanted to get some school and the drug treatment program," he said. "In the institution you can spend two years of your life just sitting around. I've worked harder here than I've ever worked in my life, I've got work skills and I've got my GED (high school equivalency degree). I'll do OK when I get out, I'll do all right."

Only time will tell if Rodriguez does "all right" after his release. State statistics show that young parolees will more likely than not be re-arrested within three years of their release.

But corrections experts — both inside and outside the CYA — say graduates of the agency's five conservation camps have a lower re-arrest rate than those paroled from the locked institutions. That's why recently-revealed plans to close the camps have drawn criticism from corrections experts, legislators and communities alike.

CYA officials will meet with local residents to discuss the future of the Ben Lomond camp at 11 a.m. today in Room 100 of the County Building, 701 Ocean Street.

The CYA must cut its budget by 3 percent this year, an \$8.9 million slice, and agency officials hoped to make the cut by closing the camps and turning them over to the Department of Corrections to house adult felons. Public outcry has caused the CYA to rethink its plans, and agency officials now say they may close only two of the camps. A final decision could be announced this week.

But the agency's apparent determination to close at least some of the camps has led some corrections professionals to believe the agency is abandoning rehabilitation in favor of "warehousing" young offenders.

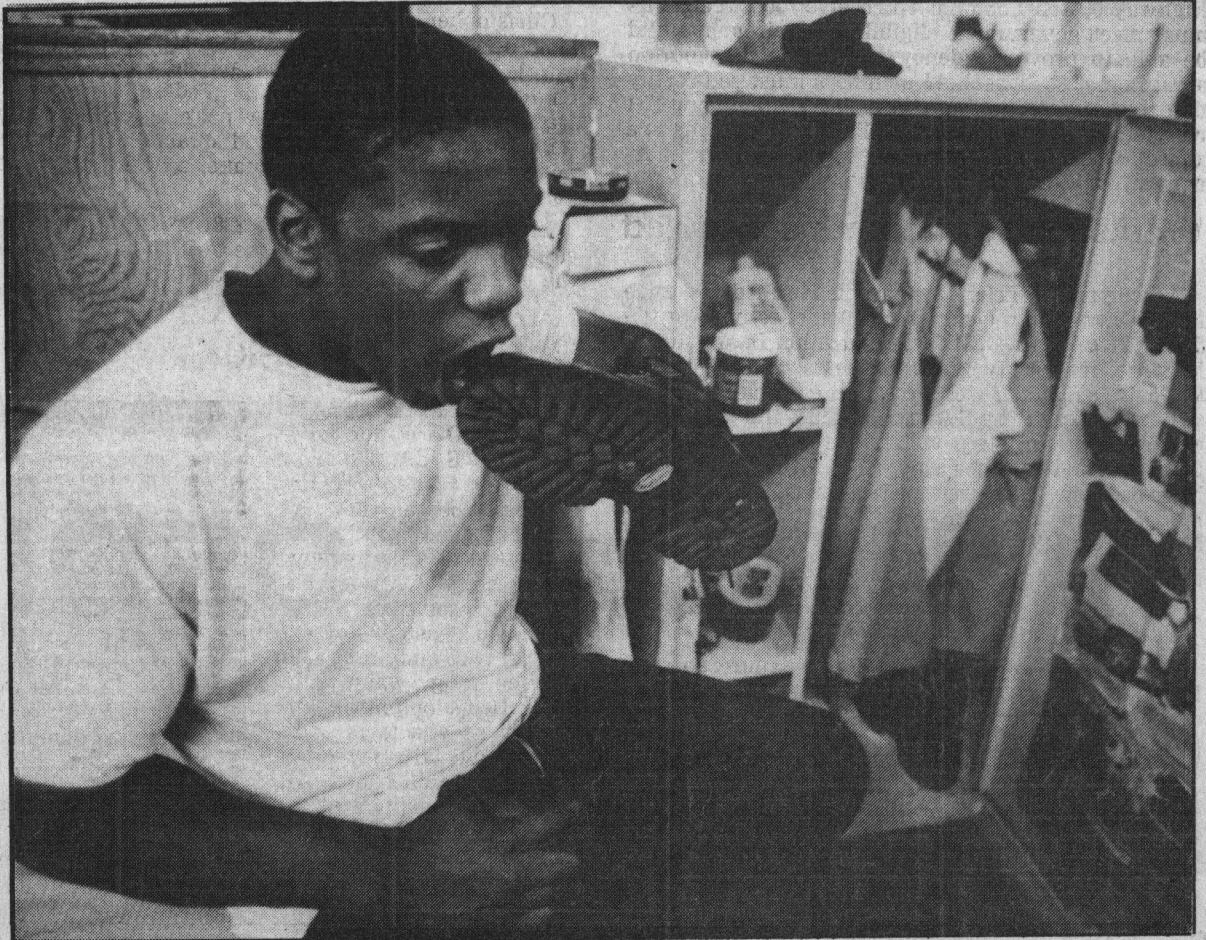
"This is a horrendous detour away from the mission of the Youth Authority," said Sue Burrell, an attorney for the Youth Law Center in San Francisco. The California Welfare and Institutions code mandates training, treatment and rehabilitation for young offenders, instead of retributive punishment, Burrell said.

"These camps are the essence of what the Youth Authority is supposed to be doing," Burrell said. "My sense is that they're trying to do more of a warehousing deal. When you have 70 or 75 people in a ward it really looks like an adult prison. There are just too many bodies."

Burrell's statements are echoed by CYA employees across the state, none of whom want their names revealed for fear of losing their jobs. But they were strongly challenged by CYA Assistant Director Tony Cimarusti.

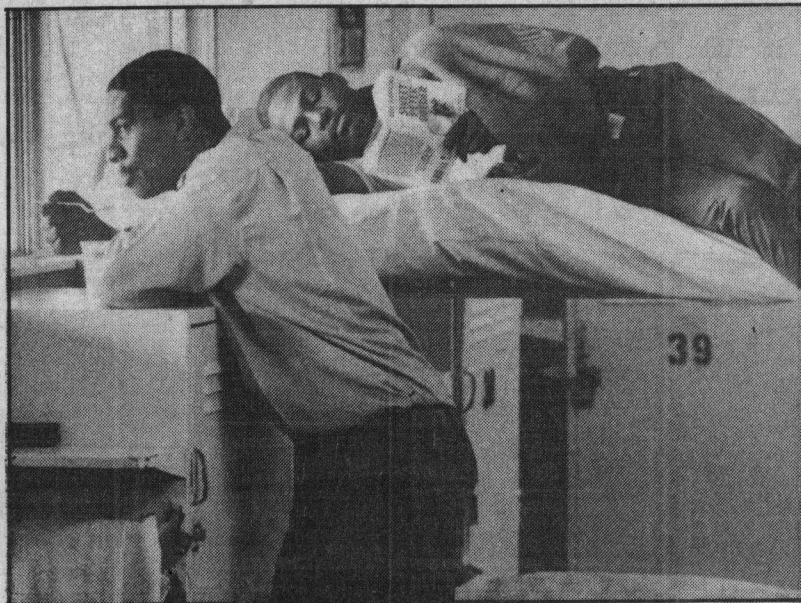
"We do more education work in the big institutions than in the camps," he said. "It's OK to say we do a good job at the camps, because we do, but it's not fair to say we don't do as good a job at the institutions. We can't abandon rehabilitation and education, we're not allowed to by law even if we wanted to. We're not abandoning education in any way, shape or form."

Interviews with wards at the Ben Lomond camp reveal a contrast between the institutions and the camp. Rodriguez said he "got no classes at all" in the institution he served time in before coming to Ben Lomond. Another 17-year old ward said he had three hours of classes each day "then I spent the rest of the



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

Spit and polish — it's part of the routine at the Ben Lomond CYA camp.



Brandon Nero and Anthony Dent take a break.



James Rodriguez says camp has given him skills.

time locked in a room" at the institution.

"It was a privilege to be in the room," he added. "On the ward you have to look out all the time" because of pervasive gang activity, he said.

One CYA worker who has served in several agency facilities said closing the camps will eliminate incentive to achieve, and will allow the agency to crowd its facilities beyond endurance. Most wards must spend half their sentence in a locked facility before transferring to a camp, which is considered a big privilege, he said.

"We know all of our kids by name here," the employee said. "We eat, sleep and work with them till we become a part of them and they become a part of us. This kind of atmosphere can't possibly flourish in a 500-bed facility where no one knows anyone."

The Youth Authority is now packed to 133 percent of its design capacity, with 8,204 wards statewide.

Ben Lomond Camp Superintendent Bill Zannella refused to comment on the possible closure of his camp, but he willingly discussed his program and

philosophy.

"It's in the small ways that people change," Zannella said, displaying a dining room with silverware, plates and sugar on the tables. "If you want people to change from aberrant to normal behavior, you need to acquaint them with a normal environment. Sugar, for instance," he said, grabbing a handful of sugar packets.

"You'd never see this in a prison, because the inmates would steal it to make applejack or pruno (crude alcoholic drinks). But in the normal world people don't steal table sugar," he said. "Institutions go to great lengths to prevent aberrant behavior, but there is very little effort to encourage normal behavior."

Camp life is aimed at making kids "normal citizens," Zannella said. The Ben Lomond wards "don't look like crooks and they don't act like crooks," he said. "If you take the effort to trust, you'll be disappointed a lot of the time, but as a society you have to make the first move."