

Goodwill gets grant for training program

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OXNARD, Calif. - As an example of how Goodwill Industries can turn lives around through its job training programs, Sal Benitez of Ventura has a simple, straightforward goal: “To be No. 1.”

Benitez was a featured speaker at the launch of Goodwill Industries of Ventura and Santa Barbara counties’ new Careers in Retail program, which is being funded by a two-year, \$3 million grant from the Walmart Foundation. The local agency is one of only eight in the country to receive the grant.

Goodwill Industries is a nonprofit that runs a string of retail stores nationwide selling

secondhand clothing, furnishings and other merchandise, while providing job training.

More than a year ago, Benitez found himself laid off from his job as a manager for an orchid company.

“It’s a common story: One day I found myself at the top of a company, and the next I was let go,” Benitez said. “Being unemployed, I needed income to support my family, so I had to get government assistance of cash and food stamps.”



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To qualify for government assistance, Benitez was asked to enroll in the Goodwill Industries Job Club. As part of his work with the club, he scanned want ads online and found that Goodwill Industries was hiring.

“So I submitted my new, rewritten résumé and I was called back,” Benitez said.

He was hired to run the Goodwill Industries store on Thompson Boulevard, where he took great pride in leading the store to No. 1 in sales in May for the region.

“When I got the job, I made a list of goals, which included being No. 1,” Benitez said.

He was then chosen to head up the newest Goodwill Industries store at 9388 Telephone Road, Ventura, which opened in July. He has written down another list of goals, among them: helping others become successful.

“Goodwill is a second-chance program. This is a place where convicted felons and others with rough backgrounds can learn to flourish,” Benitez said. “I see people growing on an everyday basis. I have one person who works with me, with face tattoos, who says, ‘I wish I’d never done what I did. Everything I have done is on my face. Now I’m grown up and I want to get away from that lifestyle.’”

During the program launch and luncheon Wednesday at the Goodwill Industries training

the new Careers in Retail program is designed to take people from entry-level jobs to middle management.

While Goodwill Industry agencies in the United States have been criticized for paying some workers with disabilities less than minimum wage, the Ventura/Santa Barbara agency has never done that, according to Kelly Fargo, Goodwill Industries director of marketing and fund development.

“We pay all of our workers at least minimum wage,” she said. “That has never been an issue for us.”



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Javier Angulo, Walmart’s director of public affairs and government relations, explained that the Careers in Retail program is part of Walmart’s five-year, \$100 million commitment to support programs that increase the earning power of those in entry-level jobs by teaching them new skills so they can move up to better paying jobs. According to Laura Kistner, director of workforce services at Goodwill Industries, the Careers in Retail program will be free to participants, who will enhance their job skills in an “intense” program.

“Before people are selected, they will be tested for certain criteria, including math and computer skills. We will provide extra training for those who are qualified,” Kistner said.

Program participants will learn about workers’ compensation, budgeting, scheduling, labor laws and more.

“There will be a job shadowing component to the program, and those who come back will have to write a paper and present it to the class,” Kistner said. “This helps them enhance their writing skills and prepares them for public speaking.”

For information about the Goodwill Careers in Retail program, call Amanda Burwick, program manager, at 988-1616, or go online to <http://www.goodwillvsb.org>.