

TEEN FACE: Formerly homeless teen defines success: Working

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Christopher Chung / PD

Joshua Vance, working with Sonoma County Adult & Youth Development, cleans up a creek near Rohnert Park doing contract work for the Sonoma County Water Agency.

Work, work, work, work, work.

Joshua Vance does it, thinks about it, likes it.

"Working is great," he said recently after spending six hours cleaning creeks on a hot day for the Sonoma County Water Agency.

In late September, after being homeless since June — he was kicked out of the house after a disagreement with his father — Vance, 19, moved from Petaluma's Mary Isaak Center shelter into a room in Rohnert Park's M Section.

In the shelter, Vance said, the hardest thing "was coming to the realization that I'm on my own and I have to do everything for myself. It took me a while to get that whole fact in my head."

"You're not on your own," interjected Leah Conde, his case manager at Sonoma County Adult Youth Development.

The Rohnert Park nonprofit, which contracts with the Water Agency to provide field maintenance workers like Vance, is helping the Denver native put his life on track.

Vance, who has been in California since 2005, mostly in Rohnert Park and Petaluma, is putting his share of muscle into that effort.

One sign of that: The walls of his room are still bare.

"I don't have time for it," he said. "In my spare time, I sleep."

His days start at 7:30 a.m. at SCAYD, from where he is dispatched to a Water Agency work site. After finishing up at about 3 p.m., he takes a bus to Petaluma, where he is a shift leader at a Taco Bell from 4:30 to 8 p.m.

Until last month, he then walked across town to K-Mart, where he worked from 10 p.m. until 2 a.m. He just quit that job, to keep his life sane.

"He was getting two hours of sleep a night," Conde said.

"It wasn't bad. Fast paced," Vance said. "The hardest part was waking up, once you're up, you're up."

He has very close cut dark hair, a direct gaze and, after a few minutes, an easy smile.

He asked Conde to sit in on an interview. Asked why, he said, "She's my go-to person, I don't know how to put it into words. She can expand on what I say."

At SCAYD, with Conde's help, he has redefined his goals and his view of earning a living, he said.

"I thought work was just work," he said. "Now I can see I have an opportunity for a career. Before, I thought all I could do was work minimum wage for the longest time."

He has impressed the Water Agency and has been offered fulltime work, Conde said. All he needs is a driver's license, which he's in the process of getting.

"I want to start as a maintenance worker and work up," Vance said.

"He has pulled himself out of the mire of being homeless and is now a golden, shining star in the SCAYD universe," Conde said.