

Opportunities Fair helps kids fine tune their skills

BY KERRY BENEFIELD
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“Nice to meet you. My name is Jose.”

That was how Jose Heredia introduced himself to Gay Kimmel, who shook his hand and would not let go. She held on, looking around, smiling.

“Did you see that?” she wondered out loud, clearly impressed by Heredia's self-introduction and first impression.

Heredia, an incoming junior at Sonoma Valley High School, was polishing up his professional demeanor Thursday at a countywide “Opportunities Fair.”

He was one of about 200 high school students and recent graduates who wound up a summer of work through the Sonoma County Youth Ecology Corps with a jobs' expo. Students took part in mock job interviews, visited tables staffed with representatives from local businesses and underwent tutorials on personal finance.

Heredia, who in the past has worked for a jeweler, spent the summer as a paid sports supervisor with the Boys and Girls Club — and thrived with the added expectations.

“The responsibility went to another level,” he said. “A chain getting stolen, that's nothing compared to a little kid getting lost.”

The three-year-old Youth Ecology Corps is funded primarily by a combination of funds from the federal Workforce Investment Act and the Sonoma County Water Agency.

Students work in small groups, clearing brush from area creek beds, planting native species, running programs at the Boys and Girls Club and perform other duties at primarily non-profit organizations. They are paid \$8 an hour, get tutorials in job readiness, interview tips and career opportunities, while gaining work experience.

“There is absolutely an education component,” said Karen Fies, director of employment and training services for the county Human Services Department. “The water agency...teaches kids why they are doing the work. They look at microscopes and teach them what is in the stream.”

“By the time they are done, they have learned a vast array of skills,” she said.

Thursday's fair was sponsored by the Workforce Investment Board's Youth Education and Employment Services Council.

Matt Mauvais, a recent graduate of Santa Rosa Community School, said the summer work was tough, but he met good people. On Thursday he spent time talking with representatives from the Volunteer Center of Sonoma County, the Marine Corps and a local engineering firm.

Mauvais said he received a good tip for his ongoing job search.

“Smile,” he said.