

# YouthBuild transforms young lives

## Program creator aims for positive life choices

By RICH BREault

Valley Press Senior Feature Writer

Rossie Johnson, executive director of Antelope Valley YouthBuild, a charter school and affiliate of YouthBuild USA, helps students make dramatic life changes, something he knows plenty about.

YouthBuild's program emphasizes education and leadership skills, empowering students to improve their quality of life and to build stronger communities.

While some people would say the students in the program are at risk, Johnson prefers to say they're at potential.

"Sometimes you have to succeed despite your background, your upbringing," Johnson said. "You have to do it for yourself."

In YouthBuild, students from ages 16 to 24 work toward a GED or high school diploma while learning construction skills by building affordable housing for homeless and low-income people.

All of the students are low income and many have had experience with foster care, the juvenile justice system, welfare and homelessness.

"I want to help them avoid the confrontations I had in life," said the 38-year-old Johnson, who looks several years younger than his age.

"I was always a good leader in school because I was an athlete. But outside of school I didn't have the same leadership skills. You need to be a leader wherever you go."



MOLLY HAUXWELL/Valley Press

**CHANGING DIRECTIONS** – Rossie Johnson, right, talks to students and makes sure they stay on track as the director of the Antelope Valley YouthBuild, a charter school for at-risk students in Sun Valley.

## Choices, chances

Raised in Pacoima, Johnson was a good enough football player to entice scholarship offers from college. Then his life changed dramatically.

"I was 18. I was playing basketball when I got into a fight on the court. I walked away. I told

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# YOUTHBUILD: Prison time changed Johnson

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my friend about it. My friend had a gun," Johnson said. "I took (the gun), went back to the court and confronted the guy I had a fight with. We started wrestling and I shot him in the leg."

Johnson was arrested and found guilty of attempted murder.

"They said it was premeditated because I went back for the guy," Johnson said. "I received a life sentence plus two years and spent 15 years in prison at California Men's Colony in San Luis Obispo."

John said he had a choice to make once he got to prison—spend his life behind bars or try to do something with his life. He choose the latter. (sic)

"I traded one moment, one bad decision, for a lifetime of trying to correct the problem."

While incarcerated, Johnson stayed out of trouble.

He joined Alternatives to Violence Project at California Men's Colony and learned conflict resolution tools and others designed to help him interact with others.

Granted parole, Johnson moved to the Antelope Valley and became involved with Alternatives to Violence Program in the Valley.

Wanting to reach teens, Johnson came up with the idea of founding Antelope Valley YouthBuild.

Darren Parker, chairman of YouthBuild's advisory committee and president of the Antelope Valley Human Relations Task Force, said he's not sure how Johnson got his phone number, but is sure glad he did.

"We talked about his vision for youth in the community," Parker said. "Rossie shared his personal story and how he wanted to help others not follow the same path.

"I wanted to help him with his dream. He's still young enough that teens will approach him and share their stories, their thoughts, their fears. He has taken students that had gotten off the normal track and gotten them back on track.

"No one can live the dream as he sees it through his eyes because he's walked in those shoes."

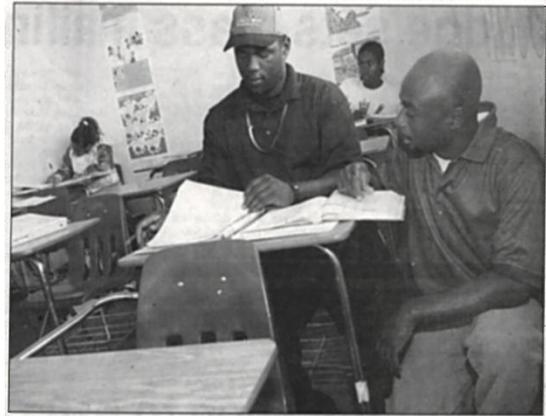
## Dedicated to youth

In its first year, the program graduated two of its five students. This year it graduated 10 of 28 students.

They also participated in the building of Palmdale's second Neighborhood House, across the street from Tumbleweed School.

'Sometimes you have to succeed despite your background, your upbringing. You have to do it for yourself.

– **Rossie Johnson, director, YouthBuild**



MOLLY HAUXWELL/Valley Press photos

**GENTLE GUIDANCE** – Rossie Johnson, right, talks to students and shows them how change can happen as the director of the Antelope Valley YouthBuild, a charter school for at-risk students in Sun Valley. Below Johnson in the classroom.

Working on the house was part of our program's job training, but more importantly it got students involved in their community," Johnson said.

"Other kids would come by and ask what they were doing. (sic) Many of our students had never received any positive feedback for things they've done."

Johnson is also involved in the Midnight Basketball program at the AV Champions Center at First Assembly of God in Lancaster and at Oasis Park Recreation Center in Palmdale.

The games are played on Friday nights to provide a positive social, recreational and educational activity during times when youth and young adults are looking for things to do, Johnson said.

"Next year we'd like to offer it at high schools and middle schools and use some of the older guys as coaches and mentors," Johnson said. "It engages the players at a time when they could be out on the streets and getting into trouble."

Victor Ruiz, also involved with Midnight basketball, said Johnson is very diligent and dedicated to his work with youth.

"Every time I see (Johnson) talking with kids, they're listening," Ruiz said.

"He can convey his message and his ideas to youth across the board, and in a very easy manner. He doesn't judge. He's very encouraging."

Johnson said he hopes to reach even more young people in the coming years.

"We want them to develop leadership skills and have access to resource information," he said.

"We want to let them know that the world is much bigger than they think it is. We want them to look at the big picture."

## **Good to the core**

Youth Build's core values include:

- Respect for every individual's intelligence and contribution.

- Cooperation toward achieving common goals within a caring community.
- Love for each other, humanity as a whole and all that is sacred.
- Courage to build bridges and go where we are not expected to be.
- Diversity as a source of knowledge, creativity and connection to the full human community.
- Commitment to work hard and overcome internal and external obstacles to success, change and excellence.
- Integrity to keep our actions and values consistent, to do the right thing even when nobody is watching.
- Responsibility for ourselves, our families, organizations, communities and society as a whole.
- Community as a source of strength and wisdom.

"The principles should be taught when children are young so that they get off to a good start in life instead of a challenging one," Johnson said.

"But at any point in your life you can effect change. It's never too late.

"In the last election, I voted for the first time in my life," Johnson added. "Because I got off parole and did well, I earned the right to vote."

"(Johnson) is a great example of realizing your true potential, about defying the odds, the labels, the situations you find yourself in," Parker said.

"He shows the students that change can happen."

Johnson would be the first to agree.

"It's been a rough road, but it's the road to change. I'm happy to be on it.




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*rbreault@avpress.com*

Transcription by Doug Couch in 2014 with changes in layout, image size, etc.

YouthBuild Antelope Valley is still growing and going strong with AVPAV Cofounder, Rossie at the helm. Rossie also helped cofound Alternatives to Violence Project Antelope Valley (AVPAV) in 2005 before launching the YouthBuild chapter.

AVPAV is one of the tools YouthBuild Antelope Valley uses with the youth. Two Neighborhood Houses these young people helped setup are used by AVPAV for holding workshops for the community, furthering the overall reduction of violence and improving interactions withing Antelope Valley.

AVPAV was a standing member of the Antelope Valley Human Relations Task Force (AVHTRF) for a number of years. After a time reformed as the AV Human Relations Commission, the body disbanded. Their purpose was to bring citizens, law enforcement and resources together to deal with hate crimes and incidents.

— Doug Couch, AVP Facilitator & AVPAV Cofounder