

A LIFE-CHANGING PIZZA

Young offenders are taught that 'work can actually be fun' at an innovative program which gives them a taste of a trade to ply after release

Mitchell Fink

The scent of fermented garlic, honey and mozzarella wafts through the air, and thin-crust dough cooks to a crisp in a brick oven.

Chefs Mitchell Westwood and Mitch Orr survey the action, snapping pointers to those serving up the Neapolitan-style pizza pies.

But this isn't the kitchen at Westwood's trendy Newtown pizza joint, or Orr's chic restaurant and bar in Surry Hills. This is the courtyard at a Western Sydney juvenile detention centre, and those manning the oven are incarcerated youth.

The makeshift pizza kitchen was part of Cobham Youth Justice Centre's Try a Trade Day, an all-day event where young people aged 16-20 tried their hand at bricklaying, barbering, gyprocking, plumbing, roof tiling, concreting, fencing, bike mechanics, traffic control and restaurant hospitality.

For the 45 young people who participated, the day was an opportunity to discover a new passion, prepare to enter the workforce upon release and, as Orr put it, recognise that "work can actually be fun."

Each participant rotated between all 10 disciplines throughout the day, learning and hearing from industry professionals, like Orr and Westwood, who volunteered their time to visit the centre.

"I feel like it was very useful for all the boys," said a young person at Cobham, who plans to pursue a career as a barber when he is released.

The young person has long held a passion for haircutting – even before he came into custody – and he's been permitted to leave the detention centre four times a week to work at a



COOK

Young offenders make pizzas under the supervision of chefs Mitchell Westwood and Mitch Orr.
All pictures: Tim Hunter



CONCRETER



HAIRDRESSER

The 45 young people rotated through 10 trades on the day, including concreting and hair dressing.



GYPROCKER

local barber shop, gaining valuable experience before his release.

Still, he said he's grateful for the Try a Trade event, which has allowed him to "try other things out and see if they were for me."

The Try a Trade program began two years ago at Cobham, and has since expanded to all six juvenile detention centres in NSW. Cobham hosts the event approximately twice a year.

"It's amazing what they've done with this program," said Cobham Assistant Manager Kevin Dowse.

"It gives the boys really important experience."

Felicity Zeiher, the community and youth justice skills manager at Training Services NSW, called it an "incredible" opportunity.

"Young people are getting

You can start to see the sparks

Felicity Zeiher

Training Services NSW

access they wouldn't have in here, but also that they wouldn't have on the outside. This really is the ideal environment to target the training and set up kids to have hands-on participation," Zeiher said.

Zeiher has helped co-ordinate connections with the various industry professionals, offering several career possibilities to the incarcerated youth at the centre.

At the barbering session in a classroom at Cobham's school, a group of young people listened intently as a local haircutter discussed the profession's benefits: "You'll never be out of a job, never get bored and have freedom."

After the barber delivered his speech, the boys lined up to give haircuts to mannequin heads featuring a mane of unruly hair. Before long, the mannequins sport stylish taper fades and neatly groomed quiffs.

In another session on Cobham's outdoor basketball court, a professional fencemaker offered a convincing pitch for the fencing industry, noting that workers can earn up to \$110,000 a year with the potential to make more by opening their own business.

After establishing an interest in one of the fields, the incarcerated boys can enter into specialised training and get connected with local tradespeople who can help them secure a job.

The process includes a mock interview, where the boys dress up and answer questions in front of several Cobham staff members.

Then, when their release is imminent, they'll have an official interview for a job on the outside.

Since the initiative was launched so recently, Cobham has not seen any change in recidivism rates as a result

of Try a Trade.

But Dowse hopes that over time, the program can make a tangible difference.

"We're trying to make it as real life as possible, so they don't come back," Dowse said.

The program has benefits for the tradespeople too, who are able to develop a pipeline of pre-trained workers for their respective businesses. And that's not to mention the special connection of working with incarcerated youth to make a positive difference.

"These (business owners) get as much out of it as the kids do," Zeiher said, adding that she's seen people leaving detention centres teary-eyed after attending a Try a Trade day.

But at its core, the Try a Trade program is designed to serve the incarcerated youth at youth detention centres, to help kids find a pathway that gets them excited about their future.

"You can start to see the sparks," Zeiher added. "These boys can see themselves in these careers."