



Chuck Kirman / Star staff

Louis Lopez, a Moorpark College student, has been working in the Human Resources Department in Thousand Oaks as part of Careers4Teens.Org. "If there were some things he wanted to develop working in an office ... he's had experience," said his supervisor, Cheryl Johnson, left.

## Directions down the career path

### Volunteer project gives young adults experience in working world

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Working as an apprentice in a steel and iron mill in Germany was enough to make Romesh Gulrajani know one thing for sure — that wasn't the career for him. But it did give the young native of India exposure to all facets of the business, training in following instruction, arriving on time and taking responsibility. It's also the basis for a new program Gulrajani has launched with the Rotary Club of Westlake Village Sunrise called Careers4teens.Org.

The volunteer-generated project is a partnership between Rotary, area businesses and schools. While it is centered now in the Conejo Valley, it is evolving to include other communities and Rotary clubs, including the Rotary Club of Simi Sunset in Simi Valley. Careers4teens is designed to help students "find out their real passion" for a career, Gulrajani said. Matches are not made lightly, he added, noting that Rotarians spend several hours with students in an attempt to match them with the right employers.

#### Real on-the-job training

Not a job-shadowing program, it is total immersion of a young adult who may not have considered college or education past the junior college level. It puts them into the business as an employee for as long or short a time as the employer wants them. It also provides them time and experience to make a decision regarding a future career that is supported by their skills and passions. And, they are paid for their work.

Participants may have no experience for the specific job, but come with no baggage and can fit the needs of the company or the job site, Gulrajani said. The bonus for the students is "we are putting them in an environment where they can grow their passion instead of doing a job for job's sake."

So far, students at Westlake, Newbury Park, Thousand Oaks, Agoura and La Reina high schools, as well as Moorpark and Ventura colleges, are registered. Businesses include the city of Thousand Oaks, Longs Drugs, Countrywide, Allied Beverages,

a law firm. For the past two months, he's worked in the city of Thousand Oaks' Human Resources Department, where he's helped develop a wellness program for city employees.

The 19-year-old Thousand Oaks resident attends Moorpark College and is eyeing future studies in business administration or international business.

"I've been pretty busy... learning so much. I have control over this program ... it's exciting," Lopez said. "We're working together to develop new classes and projections on what we're going to be doing in the next month to get city employees excited about health and fitness in general."

Lopez, who works about 20 hours a week as the wellness assistant, earns \$10 an hour, but he said he's more excited about the experience he can now list on a resumé. He's garnered program management skills and "it's given me an opportunity to get involved in something bigger than the regular hourly job."

His supervisor, Cheryl Johnson, senior human resources analyst, said Lopez's job has focused on the wellness program. He's done research, contacted vendors for promotional materials and "really kind of created a database for wellness vendors," she said. "He is very computer literate and we definitely needed someone who could use Web-based software. If there were some things he wanted to develop working in an office, he's had that ability — he's had experience working with people on the phone and in person."

"We tried to have him stretch and grow," Johnson said. "Hopefully, he'll leave the program like he has grown."

#### Experience at the helm

Gulrajani is passionate about Careers4teens and its win-win nature for all concerned. In keeping with their mission, the Rotarians involved are doing a service for the community and providing the volunteers to make the student/business connections. Students get the experience and businesses receive employees.

Because those spearheading the effort are all volunteers, there are no fees to anyone.

Gulrajani believes that Careers4teens can give students new insight into their future

because of his father. He was used to hobnobbing with "high-end" people, debutantes and princesses. He graduated at 15 from high school, and his father gave him two options for the years until he was eligible to attend "university" at the age of 18: an apprenticeship or the army. His decision landed him at the iron and steel plant in Bavaria, where he experienced everything from running machines to the administrative side of the business.

While he decided that the business wasn't for him, Gulrajani said the multifaceted skills he learned prepared him for a career as an electrical engineer. He immigrated to the United States with his family in 1969 and became a U.S. citizen. He built his own engineering company, Alpha Products Inc. in Oxnard. Now retired as president, he is still active as chairman of the company.

#### Expands School to Career efforts

The opportunity to explore career options through jobs while still in high school is a key focus of existing School to Career programs on area campuses, but a consistent challenge is finding businesses in the community that have opportunities available for students, said Laurie Looker, School to Career coordinator at Westlake High School. The Rotary program, whose members are men and women in business, fill that bill, she said.

"I think it's (Careers4teens) wonderful because one of the pluses is them knowing what's available in the business community. They make the business connection for us. Romesh can assess (the students) and make a really nice match and put the students in a meaningful internship."

About 30 percent of the 2,300 students at Westlake High are in the volunteer School to Career program, and several juniors and seniors, most of them in the school's technology academy program, have signed up for Careers4teens and are awaiting placement, Looker said. The program is well-structured and she likes the way students register online and then a Careers4teens representative goes to the school and assesses their strengths and weaknesses, which "makes the placement

#### To learn more

■ Students, schools and Rotary clubs interested in learning more about the Careers4Teens concept and how to get involved are invited to visit <http://www.Careers4teens.org> and use the "contact us" form on the Web site.

Inquiries may also be sent by fax to 988-6555, Attention: Dept. C4T.

■ Cities throughout the county, as well as hospitals, businesses, trade organizations, financial institutions and retail stores are invited to follow Thousand Oaks' example and join in the program by providing jobs and internships for high school and junior college students. Go to the employer selection on the Web site and sign up. An appointment will be made for a one-on-one meeting.

■ Also needed are volunteers to help with connecting students and employers, with secretarial work and brochures, and with fundraising and grant-writing.