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Francisco Vizcarrondo, left, a worker for Fresno Conservation Corps, works on a concrete gutter on a recent morning with Anthony Marquez. Vizcarrondo, who recently won a national award from the Corps Network, turned his life around by giving up drugs, going back to school and working for the corps.

One good turn

A former drug addict has help in turning his life around and vows to help others with troubled pasts.

By Anne Dudley Ellis / The Fresno Bee

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When Francisco Vizcarrondo opens his own heating and cooling business someday, he will not forget that others gave him a chance to succeed despite his past drug addiction, arrests and lack of education.

He has big plans -- and they'll include giving young people with troubled pasts an opportunity to work for him and turn their lives around, just as others gave him a similar opportunity.

Vizcarrondo, 23, of Fresno was among six conservation corps workers from across the nation recently named Corpsmembers of the Year by the Corps Network.

Marcos Molina, from the Tulare County Youth Corps, also was a winner.

The Corps Network is the umbrella organization of the nation's Service and Conservation Corps.

Corps operate in 42 states, employing more than 21,000 young men and women.

Most corpsmembers are low-income, and many have struggled with school and have poor prospects for employment, said Michelle Tutunjian, assistant director of Conservation Corps in Fresno, operated by Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission.

Some are referred by the court or youth prison systems. Fresno Conservation Corps also recruits at job fairs and Fresno City College.

Corpsmembers are paid minimum wage and work at least 32 hours a week, receiving training in a variety of skills as they help complete public-works projects.

The dramatic changes Vizcarrondo made in his life, and his desire to help others, are what set him apart from other corpsmembers, Tutunjian said.

Tutunjian, who nominated Vizcarrondo for the award, said he seized upon training and programs the corps offered and became a leader among his peers.

"He has determination and courage to start fresh and be open to his future," Tutunjian said.

His future didn't look so bright when he was a teenager.

Vizcarrondo, raised in Madera, said he first tried marijuana when he was 13, which led to experiments with a variety of drugs and addiction to methamphetamine.

"After that, my priorities were mixed up. My character went downhill," he said.

He dropped out of high school his senior year and began stealing to pay for drugs. After his third arrest, he faced a nearly four-year prison sentence.

As he waited in a Madera County holding cell, Vizcarrondo decided he had to change his life.

He agreed to enter a drug rehabilitation program in exchange for a suspended sentence. He went to live and work at the Salvation Army's rehab center and stopped using drugs.

After a year with the Salvation Army, the maximum allowed, he knew he should not return to his old life in Madera. A friend told him about the Conservation Corps, which found him a place to live.

He earned his high school diploma at Cesar Chavez Adult School and worked on various corps projects, learning concrete laying, framing, landscaping and other skills along the way.

Vizcarrondo works eight-hour days for minimum wage at the corps and studies heating, ventilation and air conditioning at Fresno City College two nights a week.

He was elected treasurer of the Fresno Conservation Corps' corpsmember council and has traveled twice to Washington, D.C., on behalf of the corps. He received his national award there last month.

"It was truly humbling," Vizcarrondo said.

He said he has learned to "live by principles," and listed hard work, integrity, honesty, hope and faith as guiding his decisions. He also credited counselors and others for his turnaround.

"I can never repay what they did for me," Vizcarrondo said.

He'll try, he said, by mentoring others when he has his own business.

He will complete his Conservation Corps training in December 2009, about the same time he should obtain his heating, ventilation and air-conditioning certificate from Fresno City College.

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