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## J Bar J Youth Services Unveils New Vocational School at Boys Ranch

BY RONNI WILDE — CBN REPORTER ON DECEMBER 23, 2019 BUSINESS & INDUSTRY, E-HEADLINES, FEATURE SECTION  
(The New J Bar J Boys Ranch Vocational School | Photo by Ronni Wilde)

J Bar J Youth Services, an organization made up of multiple agencies to help at-risk youth, hosted a grand opening celebration of its latest endeavor: a vocational school on the property that houses the Boys Ranch, a residential facility that is home to adjudicated youth coming out of the juvenile justice system.

“J Bar J, for years, has been teaching kids about their choices, and how their choices affect them,” said Don Smith, a longtime construction industry pro who has served as the key player in getting many local companies and their owners behind this project. “This facility will give them the chances to make good choices, and for jobs through the vocational program. We are taking positive choices and turning them into chances for employment,” he said. “This place is pretty special. It’s going to take kids who’ve made bad choices and paid the price and give them a lot of opportunities to learn trades that they can follow through with.”

Smith, who formerly served on the J Bar J Board of Directors, heard about the plan to create a vocational school on the Boys Ranch property, and offered his services. He has since rejoined the J Bar J Board, and his efforts launched what became a community labor of love in getting the facility — which cost \$750,000 — built. Smith said all of it was donated in one way another, from one large grant and monetary gifts to in-kind donations. “I want to thank all the donors who gave money out of their pockets to give these kids a chance,” he said.

Donors participating in the project contributed in many ways, Smith said, from offering excavating, engineering, roofing and office assistance to providing supplies for the school. As an example, Smith said Les Schwab donated a tire-changing machine so the boys can learn how to change out tires and then get jobs doing so. More than 30 businesses and organizations donated services, time and other assistance, including builder Cornerstone Construction, Froelich Engineers, BBT Architects, Greater Bend Rotary, which donated \$75,000 and the Bend Foundation, which donated \$50,000. (For a complete listing of community partners who donated, visit the J Bar J website at [jbarj.org/events-and-news/vocational-school](http://jbarj.org/events-and-news/vocational-school).)

The grand opening was held on December 4, and although classes in the new building will not officially begin until February 3, 2020, the youth living on the ranch have already gotten hands-on experience in assisting with the completion of the facility.

During the grand opening celebration, Amy Fraley, executive vice president of J Bar J, introduced two of the Boys Ranch residents who will attend classes in the vocational school. “I’ve done a lot of work in this building. It’s given me the opportunity to learn lots of skills,” said one of the young men, who helped with finishing touches such as assembling tables and desks, working on baseboards and trim, helping with cleanup and assisting with projects that required use of a saw and drill press. “As juveniles, it’s hard to get jobs. People say, ‘Why should we trust you?’ These skills will show that I’ve put time and energy into trying to improve my life, develop skills and train. I work every day, so I am learning work ethic.”

“It’s difficult for me to learn through books,” said another resident. “Josh (Harpole, of Cornerstone Construction, which built the center) talked with me. This facility gives us hope for a better future. We will have skills without having a degree. Maybe we can even start by just picking up nails on the ground; I did a lot of that here,” he said with a laugh. On the morning of the grand opening, the youth living on the ranch had been in the kitchen since 5am preparing food for the celebration. Vocational classes will officially kick off in February with a basic construction class, and curriculum will ultimately include courses such as carpentry, dry wall and framing, computer technology and

application design, Lego Robotics, culinary, automotive and small engine repair, woodworking and woodshop, landscaping, painting, plumbing, welding and drone development.

“This project was really grassroots,” explained Peggy Carey, director of strategic initiatives for J Bar J Youth Services. “The teachers were concerned about the kids graduating and being able to get jobs.” Erik Sieber, a language arts and social studies teacher at the J Bar J Learning Center, said the faculty is excited to teach hands-on skills that will be transferable to the real world. The teachers who will instruct the classes have been trained and certified in the particular areas of vocational curriculum. When the students complete the classes, they will be able to receive certifications that are nationally recognized and will help in procuring employment.

Plans for the new vocational facility were initiated with a quiet phase of the funding campaign in July of 2017, followed by a community campaign in October 2017. Preliminary work started in October 2018, and the groundbreaking was December 13, 2018. The completed building is spacious and bright and has lots of windows with sweeping views of the Cascades. It was constructed on the Boys Ranch property, which was already owned by J Bar J and houses the existing accredited alternative school as well as the residential facility. In addition to learning hands-on skills, the boys will be able to develop problem-solving techniques and work with role models who will serve as mentors.

The Boys Ranch is part of J Bar J Youth Services, a nonprofit corporation founded in 1968 that is currently the largest provider of services to youth and families in Central Oregon. J Bar J is the umbrella organization over nine agencies that work to improve the lives of young people who are at risk for a variety of reasons. Boys who come to the ranch are typically in residence for 12-18 months, arriving, on average, almost four years behind in their grade level. Although they usually increase their grade level by two years by the time they graduate from the Boys Ranch educational program, only a small percentage of them go on to any type of continuing education, college or vocational training. The goal for the vocational school is to change that, which will build resiliency and increase employment possibilities for the boys, reduce the likelihood of them re-offending in the community and will also help build up the local workforce.

“I have been on the J Bar J board for 20 years, and I’ve watched this organization grow from two agencies to nine,” said Jeannette McKenzie, president of the J Bar J Board of Directors. “Bend can use more vocational schools. I’m proud that J Bar J will be a role model for future vocational schools in the area.”

“I would like the community to know that our kids want the opportunity to be contributing members of society and to support themselves and their families,” added Fraley. “This represents the chance

to get a good job and join the workforce. The boys are super excited. Now we have the space to do things they want to do, for kids to explore their interests and their strengths.” She continued, “We are a strengths-based program. I love this organization. I feel fortunate to be a part of this.”

[jbarj.org](http://jbarj.org)