

## East Bay

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## SERVING WITH SMILES

■ **SAN LEANDRO:**  
Juvenile Justice Center  
cafe offers at-risk teens  
wages and opportunities  
to improve their lives

By Meera Pal  
STAFF WRITER

ONE DAY, Pedro hopes to have his own restaurant. Surprisingly, a brief stint at Alameda County's Wilmont Sweeney minimum security probation camp may help provide the foundation on which the 18-year-old Livermore resident will eventually build his dream.

Last week, Pedro and five other teens from Camp Sweeney were given a crash course in Food Service 101, when the Fresh Start Cafe opened its service window at the Juvenile Justice Center in San Leandro.

For visitors and staff members, the cafe is a place to pick up a cup of Peet's coffee, a muffin or sandwich.

For the six Camp Sweeney youths who work there, the cafe is an opportunity to develop job skills and move their lives in a positive direction.

"This is a great opportunity for us to work while we're in custody," said Michael, 18, who moved to the Bay Area from New Orleans several years ago.

Not only do the teens learn valuable skills, they are also earning \$7.75 an hour and course credits toward graduation from high school. The money is being transferred into a secure bank account that will be turned over to them or their parents once they have completed their time in custody.

"It's easy money," 18-year-old Joshua said with a smile.

Work at the cafe has been integrated into Camp Sweeney's in-house high school curriculum, which is overseen by the county office of education.

Aramark, which oversees food service for the county, is providing professional staff to train the youths employed at the cafe through classroom instruction and hands-on training.

"We are going to teach these kids everything from small business skills, retail skills and food service," said Chase Maenius, regional general manager for Aramark.

Students allowed to work in the cafe go through a special selection process.

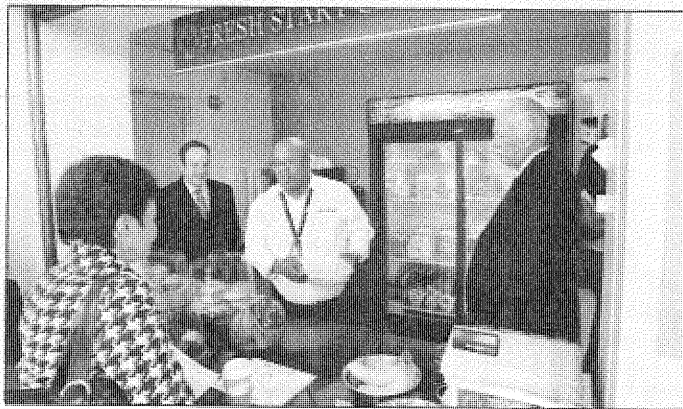
"We screen the kids. We're looking for those who show some academic proficiency," said Don Blevins, head of the county probation department. "These are the ones who have done well in school."

Joshua, who was sent to Camp Sweeney for six months, is student body president and



MIKE LUCIA/STAFF

**THE FRESH START CAFE** in the lobby of the Alameda County Justice Center, above, offers youths in the county's Wilmont Sweeney minimum security probation camp an opportunity to develop job skills and move their lives in positive directions. Food Services Director Kevin Johnson, below, shows off a grilled panini sandwich at the cafe.



will be attending Arizona State University in the fall, while Michael, 18, also plans to attend a Bay Area college when he graduates next month.

Wearing a uniform of grey polo shirts and dark slacks, the six teens respond politely to questions and are quick to describe their goals.

At 16, Diego is one of the youngest working at the cafe. He says that he would one day like to become a chef.

Blevins said that the many

programs at Camp Sweeney are designed to help the teens reach their goals once they go home.

"They screwed up. They made a mistake," he said. "We bring in programming to enhance their stay and change their lives."

Residents participate in programs for anger management, violence prevention, drug and alcohol education, family life development, grief support and conflict resolution, among other skills.

"(The cafe) is a model we want to replicate throughout the county," said Susan Muraishi, county administrator.

She added that the county is also looking into developing a culinary arts program with Laney College for the youth at Camp Sweeney.

The county's new Juvenile Justice Center opened in April 2007, without an on-site food facility.

"There was a missing link here," Blevins said. "Staff (members were) getting into their cars and going to Starbucks on their breaks."

Six months ago, the idea came up to create a cafe in the lobby of juvenile hall. Using an existing "cubby hole" in the lobby, the director of the county's General Services Agency, Aki Nakao, redesigned the space into a small cafe with a service window.

The cafe, open 6:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. weekdays, serves coffee, sandwiches, salads and other light snacks.