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A proud day

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Project Renewal class graduates, By Pamela Chergotis

Chester — The summerlike weather came as a gift to the graduates of Project Renewal on Tuesday, when they were honored in a ceremony that marked their completion of the work training program at the Camp LaGuardia homeless shelter in Chester.

The 19 graduates not only marked their achievement in the program, in which they grew organic produce which they sold in farm markets in New York City. But they also received glowing praise and appreciation from two local nonprofit groups that have benefited greatly from their volunteer work.



Some of the grads, from left: Edward Elmore, Samuel Lampkin, Larry Rudisel, Josue Vargas, Mark Wilkins, William Green, and Jonathan Sellers (2005 graduate).

Thomas Rohde, representing the Goshen Chamber of Commerce, commended their work for the Great American Weekend street fair, Goshen's biggest annual event. Every year, the men at Project Renewal do some of the festival's toughest work — hauling supplies, selling sodas, and tackling massive cleanup afterward. "It's only through the efforts of Project Renewal that we've been able to pull it off," Rohde said.

Project Renewal has also helped Goshen with other projects, such as putting up holiday decorations and pitching in at the farmers' market.

MaryEllen Count, executive director of Museum Village in Monroe, was equally warm in her praise.

"They're wonderful," she said of the men. "I can't tell you the amount of spirit they bring to their work." They set about to all of their tasks, doing yard work, even in the rain, and cleaning the snack bar, "anything we ask them to do — lift something, get something, move something — we know it will get done."

More good news is that all of the 2006 graduates are now employed, with all but one of the men living off campus. Not all of the graduates were able to attend the ceremony because of the demands of their jobs. The graduates are Marshall Allen, Howard Breedy, Venice Crafton, Robert Dobbs, Grady DuVall, Edward Elmore, William Green, Austin Huggins, Dwayne Israel, Adolphus Jones Wendell Jones, Samuel Lampkin, Larry Rudisel, Michel Russell, Edward Shelton, Brad Stephenson, Ernest Stukes, Josue Vargas, and Mark Wilkins.

Some of the men addressed the group that turned out to celebrate with them, talking about difference between the past and present. They have fought addiction, and the deprivations it brings, through much of their lives.

William Green sang out, "I made it! I made it!" to cheers and laughter. He said he was 53

years old, and the time had come to set his life right. "I had to do some serious soul searching," he said. "I give the glory to God."

Larry Rudisel said he had "got his problem down in South Carolina." Now he is working nights ("It's hard but it keeps me out of trouble"), has an apartment in Circleville, and "a vehicle so that I can see my mom in Queens."

Brad Stevenson is working for a greengrocer in New York City and attending a culinary school. His friend Adam Rosario, who graduated in 2003, said Stevenson had "a very kind heart."

The graduates drew inspiration from 2005 graduate Jonathan Sellers, who talked about the consequences of a hard childhood, and the anger that kept him from getting ahead with his life. "I had to get over my anger," he said. "I realize that my mistakes are from my own actions, and I take responsibility for that now."

Like many of the other graduates, he said he did not like the program at first, "but I realized it was something I had to do. Living life right is the only way."