

# APPRENTICESHIP

## SLO Partners Helps Locals Stay

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The beauty of the Central Coast makes it a desirable place to live, but its 287 days of sunshine a year, picturesque rolling hills and numerous beaches come at a price, and many people are struggling to make a life here. A recent study by the Hourglass Project suggests there could be an exodus of middle-class workers in the coming years if nothing is done to address economic fears.

Local nonprofit SLO Partners is working to tackle some of these issues by training locals with skills that are currently in demand by local businesses. This puts them on paths to head-of-household careers, helping them stay in the area. James “Jim” Buxton and his wife Marlena Lewis are both graduates of SLO Partners apprenticeship programs. Jim completed the Ticket into Tech program in December 2018 and Marlena completed the Tinker into Technician program in September 2019. They both know how challenging the job market in San Luis Obispo can be, and what it took to gain the right skills to trade in their jobs for careers.

Prior to taking part in the SLO Partners programs, they ran a bakery out of their home. “We were doing well, but kept hitting setbacks we weren’t ready for,” said Marlena. “We were working all hours of the day, rarely left the house and still couldn’t get the volume we needed to hit our income goals.” Jim and Marlena were both motivated to get on a career path so they could stay on the Central Coast. “Jim’s a local and I’m a 12-year transplant so we both really wanted to stay,” said Marlena. “It’s a gorgeous area and



Marlena during her training at Tinker into Technician.

Jim would melt or freeze if we moved anywhere else, but it wasn't going to be possible unless we got different careers."

Jim came across the Ticket into Tech program on Facebook. "I'd developed an interest in writing code and felt like I was getting good at it," he said. "Plus, the notion of getting a job in SLO that would actually pay enough money to live here was unique and appealing, so I had to find out more. A few months later I was accepted into the program."

Marlena heard about the Tinker into Technician program in the paper. "Jim kept trying to persuade me to apply for the Ticket into Tech boot camp but it wasn't for me. When I heard about Tinker into Technician, I signed up straight away as getting paid to build stuff sounded like my ideal job. I've always liked doing things like pulling apart cars and sewing machines, but no-one ever told me it could be a job or offered it to me as a career path."

Marlena secured a spot on the program and after graduating received three job offers. "The SLO Partners team helped me communicate how to let companies know I was interviewing elsewhere," she said. "I wouldn't have known how to do that otherwise—it was an interesting experience saying 'no' to really good jobs. I accepted a position at Trust Automation because I liked the culture and diversity." Marlena's role is a Test Technician and Assembler. She tests products to make sure they are working properly. There is opportunity for advancement as well as various technical certifications she can obtain for further mobility.

Jim also talks about how the program helped him secure a career path. "The program introduced me to people I would not have otherwise met. I would never have been able to walk into the front door of these companies and hand them my resume." Jim was hired at ES Chat as a Software Tester. "I test something different every day and like the variety. I wouldn't have been able to secure this career path without the program. Before this, the only jobs I had in SLO were in retail or coffee shops. The skills I've gained have put me on such a great career trajectory with so much potential growth. Prior to the program I did not have a long term career plan."

One of the biggest impacts of securing career paths has been in their personal lives. "We now have paid vacation and enjoy the holidays," said Marlena. "I can't remember the last time I had a paid vacation or didn't work over Christmas or holidays. Our quality of life has improved, we're less stressed and we no longer worry about having to leave SLO. The extra bonus is that we like what we're doing. Half my day is playing with power tools, it's really cool. I'm really thankful that SLO Partners exists. It's really needed in this area as a lot of people love it but struggle to stay."