

The house that students built

By [BRIANNA LUSK](#), IV Press, Sunday, May 27, 2007
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Ruben Leon admits when he joined the Imperial Valley Regional Occupational Program his freshman year of high school, he was a bit of a slacker.

But in the past few years the Brawley Union High School senior said it became more than a class.

“I made it a goal to not leave high school without learning something,” Leon, 18, said. “Now I feel like I really accomplished something.”

The house Leon helped build, along with other IVROP students, is already on the market in its final stages of construction.

And it’s what’s on top of the house that has IVROP students and their instructor, Randy Smith, excited.

Solar panels line the roof of the house that sits at 596 S. Ninth St. in Brawley, installed and wired by students.

With the assistance of Tor Allen from [Solar Schoolhouse](#), [Imperial Irrigation District](#), Michael Gohl of [The Sun Works](#) and grants providing the materials and workshops on the technology, Smith said this is the first IVROP house bearing solar panels.

“When I saw how interested kids were in it, it lit a fire under me to educate them about conservation and green energy,” Smith said. During the past two years of the home’s construction, Smith, the construction and architectural drafting instructor, has received several grants to help pay the way for students now on the cutting edge of solar technology.

By harnessing the energy generated by the sun, the new homeowners could see their electrical meter spin backward. The home will also feature a solar thermal water system, which could save the homeowners from relying on gas or electricity to heat their water. “Up to 50 percent of the home’s annual usage of power could be generated by the sun,” Smith said.



KEVIN MARTY PHOTOS

Students from the Imperial Valley Regional Occupational Program install solar panels on a house in Brawley on Saturday. Alejandro Cabrera (right), 19, connects wires to the bottom of an electrical panel with the help of (background, from right) Erick Ocegüera, 17, Ruben Leon, 18, and Victor Flores, 17.

Miguel Ruiz, who graduated in 2002, said he has been able to enter the construction industry with knowledge he gained from the IVROP class. Four months ago he secured a position with the school district and has worked with Smith in teaching other students the trade. "If I wanted to, I could build a house from the ground up," Ruiz said of the class's benefits.

Although solar energy panels have gained in popularity in other desert climate areas like Phoenix and Las Vegas, Imperial Valley residents have been slow to turn to the technology.

Nineteen-year-old Stephen O'Malley said he barely knew what a solar panel was until he joined Smith's class and went to his first solar course two years ago. Since then he's installed solar panels on recreational vehicles and is finishing up electrical wiring classes at Imperial Valley College. "Everything's starting to go green," O'Malley said. "This caught my attention. Nothing had ever gotten me hooked before."

Smith said as the lot preparations begin on the program's seventh house in the city, without the support of the school board and the district, the program wouldn't be a success.

The newly completed home, with three bedrooms and two bathrooms, has been appraised at \$265,000.

Inspired by his students' enthusiasm, Smith said he is determined to put solar panels on future IVROP homes. "I want this to become a model for the Valley. We are doing our part for renewable energy," Smith said.

For Leon, and students like him, it's an accomplishment he can look back on with pride over the years. "Whenever I pass by I'll be thinking, I can say I did something in high school," Leon said.

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Comments:

grandmamary wrote on May 27, 2007 11:56 AM:

" Ruben and all the builders, what a GREAT example you are to your generation. Please, keep learning, helping others and encouraging people to think about the environment they live in. Your parents and families should be very very proud of all of you. This has been a huge accomplishment for your ages and there should be more of these stories like this instead of the car wrecks we hear of more. KIDS, stay busy and keep your hands full of hammers and tools instead of alcohol and drugs. "