

HOW I MADE IT: GARY DRAKE

Construction saved him

HUGO MARTÍN

The gig: Founder of Drake Construction, known for remodeling homes for Los Angeles' rich and famous, including Sting, Madonna, Rod Stewart, Jim Carrey and former Secretary of State Warren Christopher. He oversees a staff of 16 full-time workers.

Background: Growing up in Los Angeles without a father figure, Drake spent many years going in and out of juvenile detention centers for minor offenses like fighting, petty theft and vandalism. "I can't think of anyone from my past who isn't dead or in prison," he said.

The turning point: While at Hillside's foster care facility in Pasadena, Drake learned to read at the age of 11. "You feel dumb all your life and then you learn how to read," he said. He also credits counselors and teachers for taking him under their wings to help him break through his emotional barriers, he said.

Learning the craft: At a private group home for troubled youths called CEDU in Running Springs, Drake learned basic construction skills such as digging ditches and hammering nails. Eventually he worked as a handyman while saving money to attend contractor's school.

The big break: "It was not one job but multiple jobs," he said of how he earned a positive reputation with wealthy and powerful clients. Such jobs included remodeling a ballroom at the Holmby Hills home of television producer and writer Bradley Bell.

Hobbies: Surfing and taekwondo.

The latest trend in construction:



ALEX GALLARDO Los Angeles Times

TURNAROUND: Gary Drake spent much of his youth in detention centers, finally shunning trouble for good after learning construction skills at a Running Springs group home.

Today, clients want him to recycle material and build energy-efficient homes. Drake hires a laborer to pull nails out of used studs for reuse. "I reuse more than I ever did before," he said.

Most important skill needed to succeed: Be persistent and patient to deal with a variety of personalities, from ex-convict employees to billionaire clients, he said. Drake also tries to be positive, even when his clients ask for the impossible.

What's it like to work for Madonna or Sting? "You are not dealing with the contact person [the client], you are dealing with the posse," he said.

Anything surprising about working for super-rich clients? Even the mega rich do not spend frivolously, he said. "Everybody I work for still watches their money," he said.

Any weird construction requests? One client asked Drake to build a dog run that was not

visible from the front of the house but allowed the dog to go in and out of the home.

When you are working on a celebrity home, do you ever get the urge to snoop around? "I do, but I don't," he said. "That's probably why I get the second job" from the celebrity clients.

Plans for the future: "If I stay with what I have now I'll be content," Drake said.

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