WHS students learn about ag careers

By TODD GUILD
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WATSONVILLE — Years ago, Gerardo Fuentes had just been expelled from the eighth grade and had to be homeschooled for a year.

That was the wake-up call he needed to get his life on a track that would eventually lead him to a job with the Driscoll’s Berry company.

He was talking on Wednesday to a group of Watsonville High School students at the school’s Careers in Agriculture in Pajaro Valley seminar, a two-day event that brought dozens of local professionals to talk about their jobs, why they like them and what it took to get them.

Fuentes said his success took hard work that included taking advanced placement classes when he eventually went to Aptos High School and was bolstered by an overarching personal philosophy that included three steps.

These he was happy to share with his audience.

“Pay attention in class, do your homework and study for tests,” he said.

Fuentes’ pathway to college — one he hadn’t considered until a counselor suggested it — led him first to Cabrillo College and then to California Polytechnic State University, where he studied agriculture systems management.

He now works as a strawberry forecast specialist, which provides a six-week prediction for the company’s sales team.

“My parents worked hard for me, and I wanted to do something that made them proud,” he said.

Fuentes assured the students that there is a job for all of them — and quite possibly a good one at that — if they find their passion and pursue it academically.

Depending on the students’ aptitudes and passions, these might include jobs in sales, marketing and information technology, he said.

Other organizations and companies included Cabrillo College’s horticulture program, Rabobank, Second Harvest Food Bank, Lakeside Organics and the California Strawberry Commission.

In another classroom, Elkhorn Slough Foundation Director Mark Silberstein said the seminar tied in perfectly with his organization, which manages some 4,000 acres of land, 10 percent of which is agricultural land.

“We have to provide economically useful farmland in a way that’s compatible with our preservation interests,” he said.

The two-day event, the first of its kind on such a grand level, was a way to give young people a glimpse of the jobs available here, said WHS Principal Elaine Legoreta.

Too often, she said, students graduate and move away, and local companies recruit employees from elsewhere.

“Our students need jobs, and our valley needs employees,” she said.

Presenters included farmers, business people, government employees and scientists who touted careers ranging from fabricators to research geneticists.

“The students don’t consider these jobs, because they don’t know about them,” Legoreta said.

Ryan Hayes, a USDA research geneticist, talks with Watsonville High School students Wednesday on the second day of Careers in Agriculture in the Pajaro Valley.

Pajaro Valley was sponsored by PVUSD, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau, Cabrillo College, Lakeside Organics, Nature, Suncrest Nurseries and Your Future Is Our Business, among others.