For some, it was gang activity that got them into trouble; for others, it was drug abuse, vandalism or petty theft. For many, it was a combination of several things that got them to the Los Prietos Boys Camp, a residential treatment facility for troubled teens located in the foothills above Santa Barbara. The dorm-style camp averages about 70 residents at a time between the ages of 13 and 18 who stay anywhere from four to eight months.

All the teens were sent to the camp by court order after getting into trouble with the law. "A lot of their issues have to do with being demonized and having no self worth. They don't like themselves and don't feel deserving," says Michael Morgan, a senior lecturer for UCSB's Department of Theater and Dance.

After 18 years of working at UCSB, Mr. Morgan decided it was time to try something new — something that would transcend theater as merely a form of entertainment. "I wanted really diverse groups coming together so we can learn from each other in spite of socialized differences," says Mr. Morgan, who grew up in Harlem, N.Y., and witnessed firsthand kids throwing their lives away.

Last year, the well-liked and respected lecturer took Homer's famous epic "The Odyssey" and gave it a twist: He chose six UCSB students and seven teens from Los Prietos Boys Camp to act in a version of the classic that combined the story with parts of their own pasts. "They take themes from 'The Odyssey,' they find the mythical elements and apply those elements in their own life," says Mr. Morgan. "They are telling their stories and speaking Homer's text. It fits so nicely as a heroic epic and it touches us all as to how we get home, back to our source, our center."

The outcome is "The Odyssey Project," a moving production that Mr. Morgan has put on for a second year with a new group of students at Center Stage Theater in Paseo Nuevo. The actors stand side by side in matching grey shirts, jeans and tennis shoes and put on a compelling performance from start to finish. It's hard to tell which actors are college students and which are teens from Los Prietos.
The actors rehearse intensively for four hours a day, four times a week for six weeks. For most Los Prietos boys, this experience with theater is their first, but hopefully, not their last. "It's a wonderful experience to watch them break the ice and struggle with their inner demons," says Mr. Morgan. "There are so many moments when they connect with what they are saying or what they wrote or what Homer wrote and they say it with such authenticity and self-worth."

For 16-year-old Andres Jimenez, one of the Los Prietos actors, being part of the production was life-changing. "It is the best experience I have had. When I read my lines it was eye-opening. I saw all the stuff I did when I read it," says Andres, who was involved with gangs and alcohol abuse. Now that he has a taste of theater, he wants more. "It has really affected me in a positive way. It was real fun," he says.

Los Prietos teen Anthony Cortez says that through the play, he discovered he really wants to go to college.

Both boys speak to why this program is so rewarding for its creator. "Working with this population and knowing that I might help them in some way to make better choices is the highest reward I could have as a teacher," says Mr. Morgan.

It's also rewarding for the UCSB students who get to share the stage with the teens. "It's a wonderful experience to get to know these boys and help them. They have so much energy and enthusiasm and have great potential to turn their lives around," says Dani Hernandez, a UCSB theater major who acted in "The Odyssey Project."

Even though the two groups of actors come from different sides of the tracks, they learn to see the similarities in their stories. "This exposes the boys to positive peers who have similar struggles in some cases, but chose a different path," says Laurie Holbrook, a supervising probation officer at the Los Prietos Boys Camp.

Ms. Holbrook applauds Mr. Morgan for thinking out of the box. "He is amazing, because he could just stay in his UCSB world, but he chose to come into our world. He is a gift to the boys camp. This is a memory they won't forget," she says.

Now, Mr. Morgan is hoping he can keep his concept going. It costs about $12,000 to put on each production, which for the first two years has been funded by several organizations, including many within the UCSB community. Mr. Morgan hopes to make the program even larger and to film a documentary, both of which will require additional funding.

He believes the collaboration is proof that art can change lives.