

A solid foundation

Foundation

Rochester Construction Training Center provides hands-on training in skilled trades to help students get jobs

Meaghan M. McDermott Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

After he retired from a career in the construction trades, L. Andrew Evans kept hearing a common refrain about the youth of today.

“I’d hear people in the circles I’m in say ‘why don’t they get a job, why are they just hanging out?’ ” said Evans, a Rochester-area master builder, businessman and entrepreneur. “But you’ve got to ask the next question. ‘Get a job doing what?’ They’ve got no skills, so they go to a prospective employer and they can’t tell that employer they have any skills or training in any area.”

Spurred to do something about that, Evans partnered with friends three years ago to set up the nonprofit Rochester Construction Training Center, where he could use his experience and contacts to help give marketable skills to people who had dropped out of high school, served time in prison or struggled to find a career.

“I asked myself is it the young people letting us down, or is it us, the grown people, letting them down?” he said. “What they need is that second chance, they need someone to reach out to them for that second chance.”

Program finds a home

For the past three years, Evans and his group have searched the Rochester area looking for the perfect place to bring their dream to fruition — a 90-day program that teaches young people the basics of all aspects of construction, including how to set foundation blocks, install a window and fix a toilet.

“We had a vision, but we didn’t have a building” said Evans.

Earlier this year, thanks to a generous donation from a benefactor who preferred to remain unnamed, the Rochester Construction Training Center found that home, a long-vacant former church at 1439 Buffalo Road in Gates.

It seems only fitting that the one-time First Presbyterian Church, built in 1907, should now house a training center for

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Lenzy Blake, 28, of Rochester measures an area where the students will install a window. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



The students are building a mock house starting with the foundation. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

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would-be construction workers.

After all, Jesus was a carpenter.

Evans and a team of volunteers have toiled since early in the year, making extensive repairs to the structure. And although much remains to be done — most pressing, fixes to the former sanctuary, where daylight can be seen peeking through holes in the roof — the center's first class of 7 students began their program in early July. Their first lesson? How to read a ruler.

Others have included an introduction to tools like framing nailers, circular and reciprocating saws, tape measures, hammers, pliers and screwdrivers. There were also sessions on types of plywood and framing lumber and insulation.

Last week, students worked in a miniature mockup house they're building inside one of the cavernous rooms in the former church, where they learned how to install top plates and jack studs, cut a rough opening and install a new window.

Foot in the door

The training was a godsend for 28-year-old Lenzy Blake, who has been in and out of tech support jobs for years, but wanted a more solid foundation to build a career.

"I want the kind of job where I will be able to say I've been here for 15 years," said Blake. Sitting behind a computer screen with a headset on just wasn't what he wanted out of life.

Being able to work with his hands is his dream, and when it comes to the training school "I wake up ready to be here every day, I've never been this happy."

Ronnell Walker Jr. kicked around in a lot of fastfood restaurants before realizing his real calling was to break into some aspect of the real estate business. Ultimately, he'd like to buy and flip homes, but

"I didn't want to be a 30-year-old working as a (restaurant) crew member," he said. "What I really want to learn is how to build a house."

The story's similar for Wiley Townsend III, a 22-year-old Greece Olympia High School graduate.

"I was working a bunch of dead-end jobs and wanted to get in a position where I could have a career," he said. He's looking forward to finishing up in the coming weeks and looking for a new job.

"It's definitely hard work, but it's worth it," said Townsend. "At the end of the day, you sweat, you cry, you get splinters, but you get to see something you built."

To be clear, Evans said, graduates of the program won't come out as master builders, or even apprentices, and there are no guarantees. But his students will have the skills to get their foot in the door working on a job site, even if they have to start out as a helper. Students could also strike out on their own, offering basic handyman skills.

Already, Evans said, he's gotten inquiries from roofers and other construction business owners, even one garage door installer from Georgia, looking to make offers when his students finish up.

The donation-supported program is seeking community assistance, including donations of building materials for students to use, and office equipment or other furnishings.

"We want to train everyone, not young, not old, not just males, but females too and we aren't confined to just people who live in the city," said Evans. "With these skills, you can go forth and keep learning."

MCDERMOT@Gannett.com

realized he'd need a background in construction to help achieve his goals.



This opening will be used to train the students on installing a garage door. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE