

Notes From the Field: YouthBuild Offers Skills, Motivation, Opportunity

By Lynn P. Shackelford, Spartanburg Herald-Journal

Christopher Geter was kicked out of high school as a junior and bounced from job to job for the next four years until the Rev. Cathaye Jones gave him a second chance.

Jones encouraged Geter to apply for the YouthBuild USA program. It is geared toward 16- to 24-year-olds from low-income families who either dropped out or were expelled from high school, but have shown a willingness to earn their high school diplomas or general educational development (GED) certificate.

On alternating weeks, for a full school year, accepted students spend time in classrooms preparing to earn their diplomas, developing leadership traits and learning construction terminology. The other weeks are spent learning hands-on construction trades, even finishing work on houses that eventually will be sold to low-income families through the Spartanburg Housing Authority.

Geter, 22, has a 1-year-old son and a daughter due this month. For him, YouthBuild has provided a final chance to earn a decent living to care for his family.

"This is helping me get back the education I lost," Geter said as he put the finishing touches on a small table he's building and staining as part of the construction training. Several of the YouthBuild participants plan to donate their tables to a new day-care center.

"It's hard to find a job without an education, and the main thing is to get a good paying job," he said.

Geter said he's unsure whether he will enter the construction field after he graduates from the program in May, but he'll take the skills he's learned with him as a trade to fall back on.

Geter is one of 10 "leaders," as they're called in the program, who is enrolled in YouthBuild Spartanburg. It is headed by Jones and directed by Daryl Dalton, director of the Spartanburg Housing Development Corp. Dalton led another YouthBuild program in Virginia and said partnerships between the housing development corporation, local vocational schools, the Spartanburg Housing Authority and the S.C. School for the Deaf and the Blind made the city a perfect fit for YouthBuild.

After receiving a \$700,000 Housing and Urban Development grant to finance the program for two years here, Dalton said there are already plans to expand YouthBuild for two additional years - if they receive the grant again.

"With the (high school) drop-out rate and unemployment being so high here, there is a need for an alternative for these students so they become productive members of society," Dalton said. "It not only helps them, it helps create affordable housing for low-income residents while they learn a construction trade on a real project."

The students earn a stipend during their participation, which is covered by the grant.

Shalisa Lee, program adviser for YouthBuild, visits all eight YouthBuild sites in South Carolina to monitor progress.

Lee said it isn't uncommon for YouthBuild programs to partner with local housing authorities, but the partnership they've created with the S.C. School for the Deaf and the Blind is unique. The housing authority and housing development corporation have a goal of accepting 10 deaf or blind students in YouthBuild annually.

"That's their goal, not ours," Lee said. "I think it's remarkable

that they want to be inclusive so no demographic is left out. That's what YouthBuild USA was founded on, not letting people fall through the cracks if they still have the urge to become a productive member of society."

Steven Campbell, 21, of Spartanburg is the only deaf participant enrolled in this phase. Others, Jones said, are enrolled for the next session, which will begin in August 2008.

Campbell, speaking through interpreter Jonathan Blackmon with the SCSDB, said he's thankful for YouthBuild and thoroughly enjoys the classes. Campbell said he likely will work in construction after he graduates.

"This program offers our students who don't graduate or go on to college a chance to get the skills they need," said Sara Kollock, SCSDB director of career and technology education. Spartanburg Community College instructor Terrill Brown said he's been impressed by the students' dedication and willingness to learn.

Brown uses material from the National Center for Construction Education and Research to teach basic construction safety, how to read blueprints, construction math, rigging, communication and employability skills.

"They're sharp, very cooperative," Brown said. "They have a hunger for attention, to get help they need. The way I look at it, it's better to give them skills that will make them attractive in today's work force rather than see them in jail where they aren't helping anybody."

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