



Pepper Construction Group



BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

BY RACHEL CRIPPIN CLARK

ANYONE WHO'S EVER LIVED OR WORKED NEAR A BUILDING CONSTRUCTION SITE PROBABLY COULDN'T HELP BUT BE INTERESTED IN THE PROCESS.

One day there are monster-size yellow excavators rumbling around, clawing out a mammoth hole in the ground. Another day the cement mixers arrive and a foundation is set. That's followed by a combination of pounding, screeches and thuds as beams go up and bricks are laid. Before you turn around, there's a building gleaming in the sky and quiet resumes as finishing work like plumbing and electric moves inside.



CCOP hires helped the George Sollitt Construction Company build the Polish Consulate.

With all the attention generated by the giant machinery, the steel rising in the sky and certainly all the noise, it's easy to overlook the people involved. They operate the excavators, survey the site, pound the nails, weld the pipes. And they're probably the most important part of the process.

"You don't build buildings in a factory, just by dropping down parts onto an assembly line," explains Al Leitschuh, CAE, president of the Builders Association, a Rosemont-based trade association serving the Chicago-area commercial construction industry. "You need people to put the bricks in place."

And not just any people. Building construction requires highly skilled workers trained in a number of technical trades: people who have an aptitude for problem-solving and teamwork, people who like working at a unique setting like a construction site and will stay for the long-term, and increasingly, people who better reflect the area's population and represent all of the communities in which they work.

Taking into account the industry's many workforce challenges, the Builders Association has embarked on a new program that provides key training to those underrepresented in the industry. A partnership with three community organizations and City Colleges of Chicago, the Construction Career Opportunity Program (CCOP) targets minority students and opens the door to new resources for students and employers alike.

CONSTRUCTION WORKFORCE AGES

Despite the current economic climate, significant long-term growth in the construction industry is predicted. Construction jobs are expected to grow by 10 percent nationally by 2016, according to the U.S. Department of Labor (and 15 percent in the Chicago area by 2014, according to the Illinois Depart-

ment of Employment Security). The average age of construction workers — typically a younger profession — also is growing. From 1980 to 2000, the most recent data available, the average age has grown from 36.6 to 38.7, according to the Center for Construction Research and Training.

Leitschuh feels that a decline in vocational education in high schools and increased accessibility to college has caused construction as a career to suffer. "It's not exactly a career that many kids aspire to," he says. "For whatever reason, parents nowadays don't raise kids and say, 'We really want you to grow up and be a carpenter.'"

Adding to the dearth of new applicants is the unique process of getting started in the industry. Most construction jobs, especially in the Chicago area, are union jobs. With the exception of general journeymen/laborers, those looking to do construction work must complete an apprenticeship — and pass an exam — with a specific union. Unions represent everyone from electricians and plumbers to bricklayers and carpenters, and you must be sponsored into them by either a current member or construction firm.

What's more, the quality of construction workers is even more important than before; it's often not a case of just having more bodies. "The cycle of work is much quicker (today), and we need to do more with less," explains Howard Strong, president of George Sollitt Construction Co. Laborers with specific areas of expertise need to move into a job site and quickly perform their piece of the work before a different batch of laborers moves in, and the others move on to a new site.

Attracting people interested in a long-term career in construction is also a challenge, according to Shihara Byford, senior human resources manager at Pepper Construction. While some may be attracted to the field because of a particular project in their neighborhood or higher-than-average wages (U.S. Department of Labor quotes \$20 per hour for non-supervisory jobs), the industry really needs experts who can stay for the long-haul.

DIVERSITY ISSUES

At the same time, white males tend to dominate construction work. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2007, blacks represented 5.7 percent of U.S. construction workers, Hispanics 25.3 percent and women 9.4 percent. In northeastern Illinois, blacks represented 10.7 percent, Hispanics 26.6 percent and women 2.9 percent, according to a 2006 study commissioned by City Colleges of Chicago (CCC).

It's an issue that has drawn much attention in the construction industry and minority communities alike. The decline in manufacturing jobs — both nationwide and locally — has directed even more attention to construction.

Locally, relationships between the construction industry and minority communities had been strained in the late 1990s and early 2000s because of a dispute over "set-aside" requirements for minority-owned businesses. Both Cook County and the city of Chicago had decades-old ordinances stating that 25 percent of city construction contracts had to be spent on minority-owned firms; 5 percent on women-owned firms. The construction community's argument was that such requirements were illegal because there was no proof of discrimination.

The construction community ultimately prevailed when lawsuits filed against the county and city were successful, in

2000 and 2003 respectively. The city of Chicago now has a new scaled-down set-aside program addressing many of the legal questions.

However, the outcome did nothing to help the recruitment of minority workers, recalls Leitschuh. Some in the community were not pleased with the outcome, the press was bad and emotions were running high. Despite getting the ruling they were seeking, Leitschuh says the construction industry realized there was now collateral damage from the legal challenge that needed to be addressed. "We immediately sat down and started to ask, 'What are we going to do about it?'" Leitschuh says.

BUILDING A BRIDGE

Starting out, the association attempted general education campaigns for minorities on the benefits of a construction career. But it ultimately decided that was too much of a "tiny message in big media," according to Leitschuh, and difficult to generate or measure results. Looking for other ideas, Leitschuh reached out to Illinois Senate President Emil Jones, D-Chicago, and secured his support.

He then reached out to other minority leaders in the community, many of whom suggested an official program to help people get started in a construction career. One of them, Eddie Read of United Services of Chicago, Inc., suggested collaborating with the CCC, which had a construction tech program at Dawson Technical Institute — part of Kennedy-King College. Read knew Wayne Watson, Ph.D., CCC chancellor, and the three of them started brainstorming a potential program to train and place minorities in the industry.

At that point, Leitschuh realized he needed to bring in the contractors since they were the ones who were going to make any program happen. Five members — top executives at some of the biggest hirers — were invited to be on an Industry Task Force to explore the program. That task force then sat down with many of the early players, including Leitschuh, Watson, Read, the Rev. Anthony Haynes, director of the Building Bridges Project, and Carl Lattimer, president of the Coalition for United Community Action — ORTC Inc.

Their initial meeting was a turning point. Because of the lawsuits and resulting animosity, "There was a lot of undercurrent, a lot of feeling out and trying to judge the sincerity of those across the table," Leitschuh says. "Everybody was on their best behavior, but I think everyone was wondering if we all could ever get on the same page."

That apprehension lasted only that one meeting, he says, and the end result was positive. "In hindsight, it was relatively easy [to agree on a partnership]; it wasn't like we were sitting there re-hashing old concerns and issues. Everybody committed to a program and realized we all had a common goal."

BUILDERS ASSOCIATION MISSION

"To be the leading prime contractor-led organization assisting members with improved profitability and productivity." The Builders Association offers contractors access to resources that can help them solve problems and make better decisions about labor, safety, education/training, government relations, communications and more.



Harry McGraw of Dawson Technical Institute gives some final pointers to students as they head out to be interviewed during an Interview Day.

THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF CCOP

It was only eight months from that initial meeting until they were holding a news conference, complete with Jones and Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley. In November 2005, Daley — flanked by representatives of Chicago's construction industry, minority communities and local government — announced the ground breaking partnership between the Builders Association, City Colleges, and the community organizations led by Read, Haynes and Lattimer.

The groups would collaborate on an expanded construction tech program at Dawson Tech — CCOP, which would be a pre-apprentice training program preparing largely minority students to enter the construction field. Courses would offer training in five specific trades: bricklaying, carpentry, concrete masonry, welding and plumbing/fire protection. They also would include some applicable math training, basic job skills and the ins and outs of what it's like to get into — and work in — the construction industry.

Certificates would be awarded upon completion of a one-semester course focusing on a specific trade. The more aggressive students would complete courses in multiple trades, and could elect to take math or other courses to enhance their marketability. College credit would be awarded for those seeking a higher degree.

In addition, the Builders Association would organize several Interview Days at Dawson Tech, bringing its contractor members to campus to interview students for jobs. Members agreed to hire up to 50 candidates per year collectively, often sponsoring them into a union.

To prevent any financial barriers to entry, the association set up a \$25,000 annual fund to help any new hires defray the

MEET SOME CCOP GRADUATES

With the CCOP and their new jobs in construction in common, Dawson Tech graduates come from different walks of life, are at different places in their lives and have different areas of expertise. Here are a few:

- A recent high-school graduate, **Jeff Volin** was only one month into his carpentry course when he participated in an Interview Day. Yet he still managed to impress Pepper Construction, who sponsored him into a union after graduation, even though they didn't have a job available at that time. Now a second-year apprentice with them, he says, "I've always liked doing something with my hands and building things that are going to stay there. If you work with computers, you do something to them today and it might not be there tomorrow."
- **Charles Augustus** had worked in union construction in Minnesota, but he moved back to Chicago and was looking for work. "I went to Dawson to improve my skills," and I wasn't disappointed. It's an excellent program, and I'm proud to have gone there," he says. Augustus is now a second-year carpentry apprentice.
- **Latrina Kertchen** isn't phased by working in a predominantly male field. "I've always loved to do 'manly' things, and once I got into concrete masonry work, I've just been amazed by the process," she says.
- **Dalton Brown** had some experience in non-union carpentry, but his experience at Dawson allowed him to take that to the next level. His instructor "could sense that I was overly ambitious and took me under his wing and really nurtured me," he says. When he was a student, he had three serious interviews as a result of an Interview Day and is now working as a project manager, overseeing job productivity and quality control onsite.

cost of getting started in the industry. (Applicants could apply for assistance for anything from union membership to required tools to transportation between job sites and their homes.)

A "WIN-WIN" PROJECT

To date, 52 students have been hired from the program as carpenters, cement masons, laborers and roofers. Six Interview Days have been held (twice a year), with about 20 companies participating. The association's financial assistance fund — which the board moved to simply set aside from their general operating fund — has been well used.

By many accounts, the program has been successful because it meets everyone's goals and needs. "CCOP is designed to meet the needs of both the commercial construction industry and minority communities that are underrepresented in the construction workforce," says Michael J. Faron, president of W.E. O'Neil Construction Co., who chaired the association's Industry Task Force. "It helps address all of the issues facing our industry and our workforce — so that participating in the program is just good business practice."

It's also a good fit for City Colleges, where workforce development is one of its cornerstones and strengthening relationships with external constituents is a goal in its Vision 2011 plan. Though students of all demographics attend, the institu-

tion historically has focused on eliminating barriers for those with socio-economic disadvantages. "It's very satisfying seeing so many students placed in jobs," says Harry McGraw, director of employment services at Dawson. "I've seen a lot of changes [in the four years McGraw has worked at Dawson], and there are now a lot of people out there trying to do what we're doing."

And the young men and women who participate reap the benefits. "It's an excellent program," says Charles Augustus, who graduated in September 2006 and is now a second-year carpentry apprentice. "I can't speak highly enough about it, including Harry McGraw [who served as Augustus' carpentry instructor]. What he expects of his students, in fact demands of his students, is top-notch."

"[The program] really allowed me to hone in on what I wanted to do in construction," says Dalton Brown, a graduate now working as a project manager. "The staff really cares about you and is always making sure you're really getting your lessons. They don't coddle you or give you any misconceptions about what you're doing."

FINE-TUNING

Shortly after all parties were on board with CCOP, the Builders Association formed a second task force — the Field Advisory Task Force — to help put together details of the program. This group consisted of eight members who were directly involved with hiring field personnel, so that their specific needs could be addressed.

This task force is responsible for advising Dawson Tech on the curriculum and issues related to interviewing. They meet periodically, and two staff people at the Builders Association act as liaisons with Dawson staff. After the initial set-up, the three partner organizations are still in touch but the work is largely among the Builders Association, its members and Dawson.

Since the first few Interview Days, a lot of attention has been paid to developing students' soft skills. While many can-



Klein Tools, built by McShane Construction Corp. with the help of hires from the CCOP.

TOP-TIER PROJECTS

Since its inception, CCOP students have worked on a number of large and high-profile projects including:

- **McCormick Place West Expansion**
(Clark Construction Group, LLC)
- **Regency Place**
(McShane Construction Co.)
- **Englewood Child and Family Center Interior**
(Bulley & Andrews)
- **Hartgrove Hospital**
(Ceco Concrete Construction)
- **Polish Consulate**
(The George Sollitt Construction Co.)

didates had the technical skills early on, they didn't necessarily have the whole package that contractors were seeking. "We need employees with a 'can-do' positive work ethic," Byford says. "We tell candidates that it's about not only showing up — but being early, it's about working safely, it's about reliability ... those are the things that will really help them stand apart from their counterparts."

Helping students understand the ins and outs of working in the construction industry also is now a focus. After a while, the association and its members "became much more aware of what it takes to be successful in a construction career," Leitschuh says. "The thinking was always a bit like 'you're big and strong ... you can handle it.' Really, we found we were stereotyping ourselves."

In reality, Leitschuh explains, the industry is unlike many other industries. In order to succeed in it long-term, a certain aptitude is necessary, as is some preparation in how to handle its intricacies. For instance, it's not your normal 9 a.m. to 5 p.m./five-days-a-week job; hours and shifts depend on a combination of weather and day-to-day job progress. Someone is always watching you, unlike in an office setting where most people can take personal phone calls or use the Internet. Jobs are subject to union seniority, which sometimes complicates work assignments.

Dawson has incorporated many of those elements into its curriculum, and field personnel from member contractors visit classes to explain firsthand what it's like. Dawson also handpicks the students whose resumes will be forwarded to the Builders Association for their members' consideration and helps prepare them for the interview process.

"We focus on those students who have shown good aptitude in class, have resumes on file, and have shown aggressiveness in wanting to work," McGraw says. They provide interview tips and insights into how the hiring process works in construction. "We make them aware of the challenges unions have, and how contractor partners have to adhere to certain rules," he says.

In fact, that attention to the role of unions — the program after all is considered a "prep" program for union apprentice programs — has been important. "We want to be user-friendly to the unions, and contractors feel better knowing unions are attached to the program," McGraw says. "CCOP is a sensible way of getting all parties together [including the unions]."

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BLUEPRINT FOR SUCCESS

In the end, there are many strategies that have played a role in CCOP's success. But a few stand out in Leitschuh's mind. First, "We really made an effort to put together a quality program that provides real value to students as well as the construction companies," Leitschuh says. "This wasn't a case of 'If we put a sign on the door, they'll come.'"

On the association side, Leitschuh also credits part of the program's success to the effort staff placed on personally visiting many of the member companies, talking about participating and following through. "This was a big deal ... we're asking them to hire people ... not just buy a new book," he says.

Going forward, the association would like to increase participation — the number of companies at Interview Days and the number of hires. But both of those are likely to come as they work to improve the quality of program graduates.

"It's a slow process but if you spread it out across the membership of the association, you can make something happen and change the make-up of the industry's diversity," Strong says. He would like to eventually see the program — or some kind of industry education and vocational training — extended to the Chicago Public Schools as well.

"We realize we're not going to change the industry overnight," Leitschuh concurs. "But we've really opened the door and created a new pipeline of good qualified workers. The workforce is the key."

So the next time you pass by a building construction site, take a minute to look past the massive machinery and all the noise. It's the people that are making it all possible. And it just might have been the Builders Association that helped some of those employees get there. ■

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THE AUGUST 2008 SIGNATURE STORY features the American Academy of Orthopaedic Executives and its recent rebranding process. The AAOE, based in Rosemont, is a 501(c)3 organization with about 1,450 members and an annual budget of just more than \$1 million dollars. For more information, visit www.aaoe.net.