Work Now Grads Look Forward to a Future in Construction

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Only a few weeks after completing the Work Now training sessions, eight participants gathered to interview at the Construction Employers Association (CEA) with Glen Shumate and seven CEA employers. Shumate, vice president of public affairs and education, encouraged the participants prior to interviewing and asked for feedback afterwards. All were filled with anticipation and excitement about a possible new construction career.

**Work Now, the four-week construction initiative** targets individuals interested in the construction trades. The [Urban League’s Solid Opportunities for Advancement and Retention](http://ulcleveland.com/index.php/programs/workforce-development) (SOAR) soft-skills training program partners with the CEA to help increase the number of workers in the construction community.

“The program opened my eyes to a few things,” answered 27-year-old Kato Montgomery when asked about what he learned from participating in Work Now. “I learned how to use the skills I already have and the new skills I learned. We were taught how to interview, present yourself to your employer, proper etiquette, how to dress, sit, how your tone is important…a lot of things that people lack from where I come from - Outhwaite Homes.”

Marshay Gibbons, is one of the oldest program participants, learned a lot about construction of which she wasn’t aware. “I learned that an asbestos worker is part of the construction industry. They remove contaminated soil, debris and materials and dispose of it properly. It’s one of the dangers of some diseases, like respiratory, and can cause cancer,” she explained. Gibbons is interested in becoming an asbestos worker. “It hit home for me,” she said. “I had to do research. It opened my eyes to a different trade I’m interested in pursuing. My son had lead poisoning when he was two, and it wasn’t from paint,” she adds.

Of the seven companies: AKA Construction Team, Cook Paving & Construction, Donley’s, The Great Lakes Construction Co., Northstar Contracting, Precision Environmental and PSI, five expressed a genuine interest in hiring the individuals they interviewed.

 “I really want to applaud CEA for their vision and leadership and wanting to help to put together a program that would get individuals to work right away,” said Marsha Mockabee, president and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Cleveland. “As the Urban League moves toward the Centennial year, we have three objectives,” says Mockabee. “We want to be systems driven, community responsive and collaboratively positioned. That is how we are going to do the work. We have to work with the community to help them overcome barriers that are preventing them from access. Collaboration is in the Urban Leauge’s DNA.”

It was the collaboration between the Urban League’s SOAR program and the CEA’s Work Now program that created the opportunities for individuals like William Flenoy. Prior to entering the program, Flenoy was looking for employment after losing two jobs in January.

What Flenoy liked most about the program was that he was challenged “in a lot of different ways.” “Some of us were not good at public speaking. I was in pursuit of overcoming my fears of speaking in public. We also got a better insight on professionalism: Conducting yourself like a professional, our attire, how we should speak and the soft skills necessary to be successful in the business world,” he said.

Growing up, the 25-year-old Flenoy walked past new construction projects and was intrigued by them. “I always wanted to build a house,” he said. “I have an interest in the carpentry trade.”

Shumate explains their organization’s interest in making a difference. “The initiative is the CEA attempting to support inclusion and Cleveland’s community benefits efforts. It’s important for our association members and the industry to provide awareness and an opportunity to a pool of individuals that we feel are highly qualified,” says Shumate. “It’s part of how we think about disparity in the construction field. What’s important is that there are ready, willing and able individuals and businesses. This group fulfills that. They are ready, willing, able and *capable* to enter the construction industry. We stand by the three Es…education, exposure and experience.”

Shumate encouraged participants to do their due diligence after interviewing. “Follow up. Call the people you sat down with. Don’t wait for them to reach out to you,” he said.

Gibbons has words of encouragement for her peers interested in a construction career. “The construction field is a demanding field that needs workers. I’ve been telling young men and women that there are barriers that can stop you, but you can’t let it happen. Don’t let the past define your character. If you think you can’t do it, you won’t do it. This is my new career,” she stresses.