

YouthBuild aims to construct strong students

Urban League sponsors effort to foster student progress

By VELVET SPICER

Bria Beckley seems like a typical college student: tired, frazzled perhaps, but determined. Scratch the surface and it becomes clear that Beckley's path to Monroe Community College was a long and bumpy one.

The 24-year-old criminal justice student in 2016 received her General Equivalency Diploma through the YouthBuild program at Urban League of Rochester, N.Y. Inc. She found Urban League—through a mysterious letter—at a time when she had just about given up.

"I had gotten a letter in the mail saying that I had signed up for the YouthBuild program," Beckley recalled. "Honestly, I didn't remember signing up for the YouthBuild program. Two months later I came in and I was hesitant at first."

Beckley had been through a number of G.E.D. programs and said her problem stemmed from a lack of commitment. The letter from Urban League came at the right time, she said.

"I say now it was a blessing to me how everything worked out, because my life changed fast because of that program," she said.

"We have come up with a sustainability plan, and we have never closed the doors on the YouthBuild program," James said, noting that the program is funded primarily through the U.S. Department of Labor.

Added Urban League President and CEO William Clark: "I think that's important because in several of those years we did not receive the federal funding. But our board of directors saw the outcome, saw the results we were getting and the transformation we were making in these young folks' lives and felt it important enough to go out and raise the funds, along with the staff and the research to continue the program."

Clark said that over the last two decades Urban League has worked on constant improvement. The organization saw ways in which it could bring in the entire Rochester community to help YouthBuild meet its potential, and pursued organizations that could help the agency with training and jobs.

The YouthBuild program offers more than a high school diploma and construction skills. Students participate in personal and leadership development, career exploration and counseling and case management.

"I was at Sears a while back getting new tires and the young man that was running the tire component of the Sears auto shop recognized me, and he said, 'You don't remember me but I'm a YouthBuild graduate,'" Clark recalled with a smile. "So even though he chose another career field, those skills that he learned in the program allowed him to go on to Sears automotive, and now he's managing the tire shop."

But at its core, YouthBuild provides the pre-apprenticeship certification training that is an industry-recognized credential through the Home Builders Institute, said Mubarak Bashir, YouthBuild Rochester's program director.

Bashir noted that the training consists of four modules that better prepare students for work in the construction industry.

"Those modules consist of construction math, work readiness, construction safety and the knowledge of tools," Bashir said, adding that the training has a particular focus on carpentry.

Some funding from the New York State Energy Research & Development Authority also allows a focus on building science.

"So, not only do our students get this pre-apprenticeship certification training, but now they have this basics of building science, which focuses on energy efficiency, which is really becoming a big thing," Bashir explained.

As a result, students take "green" field trips.

"We've been to places where students were able to see solar panels, just to kind of educate them about energy efficiency because this is something that is up-and-coming," Bashir said.

The first two weeks of the YouthBuild program were designed to prepare students for the hard work that lies ahead of them. During the "mental toughness" portion of the program, students are put through a mini boot-camp, they participate in ice-breakers and team building exercises and are tested to see how committed they are to completing the program.

From 2013 through 2017, nearly 70 participants enrolled in YouthBuild and nearly one-quarter of the participants were female. Some 79 percent of enrolled participants attained a degree or industry-recognized certificate. Urban League's goal was 70 percent.

"We're working with a lot of young adults that left high school, and there's really that lack of structure," Bashir said. "Because the program is rigorous, we want to make sure we're bringing in the right individuals."

As part of the program, students work on a number of construction sites.

"I would say within a year we touch at least four to six houses," Bashir said, including some work with Flower City Habitat for Humanity, as well as the reconstruction of a burned out building on Thurston Road that was given to the Urban League.

The YouthBuild program prepares students for both college and the workforce.

"Many of the YouthBuild graduates go on to work with contractors that we use in our economic development corporation," Clark noted. "It's a pipeline to gainful employment for many of the young folks. And because of the relationship we have through our development corporation, we're able to show them the light at the end of the tunnel."

Anton Campbell-Bell earned his diploma through the YouthBuild program in 2015. He had been kicked out of Job Corps—a



Provided by Urban League

Bria Beckley received her General Equivalency Diploma through the YouthBuild program at Urban League of Rochester, N.Y. Inc.

national organization that offers free educational and job training for low income individuals—and wanted to continue doing something in construction.

"I got my diploma through them," Campbell-Bell said. "The construction certificates and the skills were another big thing." And, he said, YouthBuild found him a job.

"They're really there for you—that's the main thing," he added. "I was one of the worst kids in Urban League. I was still young. I was still being disobedient. But they helped me, they kept me focused. They didn't kick me out or send me home."

Campbell-Bell works as a carpenter with Hamilton & Stern Construction Co., a job that easily could be a career for him, he said. But he has something else in mind.

"I'm in school now. I'm going to be an anesthesiologist," he said.

"The beautiful thing about the college tours is during orientation, mental toughness week, I always ask how many students want to go to college, and you may get one or two hands that go up," Bashir said, grinning. "Once we start exposing them to college and start taking those college tours, we come back and ask that same question (and) you'll see 10 or 20 hands go up. The exposure's a really key thing for our program."

Campbell-Bell was one of those students. Mr. B, as Bashir's students affectionately call him, convinced him he could do better.

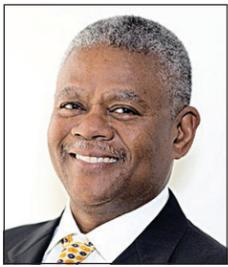
"They try to help you a lot," Campbell-Bell said. "When I was in school I'm like, 'I ain't going to college.' And Mr. B was like, 'Don't say that. You're going to see what you get in the real world and say I've got to go to school.'"

Beckley has a similar story.

"They really taught me how not to give up, because that was my personality. Whenever something got hard for me I just gave up," she recalled. "It was mainly Mr. Bashir, he just pushed me to the point where there was no me saying no anymore."

"That's why I'm really thankful to him for that because I wouldn't be where I am today at all if it wasn't for Mr. B," Beckley said. "I can honestly say I would not have gone to college if it wasn't for Urban League."

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Clark



Bashir



Campbell-Bell



James

YouthBuild Rochester is based on the YouthBuild USA Inc. model that was first developed in East Harlem in 1978 by Dorothy Stoneman.

"She actually wanted to improve the community of Harlem," said Shelia James, Urban League vice president of program planning, research & evaluation. "And also she wanted to take back empty buildings and the poverty that existed in Harlem."

The Harlem Youth Action Program's first project was a gutting and rehabilitation of an abandoned 10-unit tenement building. The project's success led to an expansion of YouthBuild such that today the nonprofit organization has 260 urban and rural YouthBuild programs in 46 states, including Rochester's premier program through the Urban League.

The mission of YouthBuild USA and YouthBuild International is to "unleash the intelligence and positive energy of low-income young people to rebuild their communities and live their lives."

The program targets disadvantaged youth aged 18 to 24, three-quarters of whom have left high school. Participants must meet one of the following criteria: be a member of a low-income family; in foster care; adjudicated; an individual with a disability; a child of an incarcerated parent; homeless; or a migrant.

Each year some 10,000 low-income young people nationally, who have left high school without a diploma, enroll full time in the 10-month YouthBuild programs. About half of

the program time is spent in classrooms, while the other half is hands-on job training building affordable housing or other community assets.

A strong emphasis is placed on creating a safe and caring community of adults and peers committed to each other's success, and YouthBuild accepts students with a wide array of backgrounds, including those with criminal records.

Locally, Urban League received its YouthBuild accreditation in 1996 and has served nearly 600 young adults during that time, with or without federal assistance, James noted.