

STRUCTURAL BUILDING COMPONENTS MAGAZINE (FORMERLY WOODWORDS)

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"Grow Your Own Labor" by Douglas A. Shipman

In past generations, women traditionally learned much different skills than men. Typically, men were learning to work with their hands on projects like building houses. Schools taught vocational skills like woodshop as early as the seventh grade. Building, especially for the depression-era generation, was what young men learned in addition to their preferred work or training. As a result, for most of the post-WWII era, there has been a healthy labor market from which the building industry could draw potential employees.

With the decline or elimination of vocational education in schools in the 1980's and 1990's, as well as the quick rise of computer education as the default employable training, the number of potential skilled workers in the construction trades steadily dropped. This, combined with a massive building boom in the last half of the 1990's, has helped to create chronic labor shortages in many regions, especially those experiencing rapid growth.

In the Coachella Valley of Southern California, home of resort towns such as Palm Springs, Palm Desert and Indian Wells, these problems combined to create one of the tightest labor markets in memory. In addition, builders, eager to cash in on the housing needs of well-healed, retiring baby boomers, were creating little affordable housing. Worse still, local high school students, who were willing and potentially able to fill the open spots in these trades, were getting no introduction to them. There was little done in the way of presenting construction as a career to high school students.

To many, the problems were clear. High school students desperately needed effective training in construction so that they might enter these trades, and businesses needed entry-level workers who wanted to make a career of construction and who were trainable in the long term for the much needed journeyman-level positions. Many cities, already experiencing a dearth of low and moderate-income housing, were struggling to provide decent, affordable homes to those people who moved to the Coachella Valley to take advantage of the booming economy.

In 1996, an ambitious educational program, founded by Leo Wyler in conjunction with the Coachella Valley Boys and Girls Clubs, began to address many of the problems facing the high school students, the construction business and the cities. Wyler, a successful retired businessman from the aerospace industry who is interested in giving back to his community, provided the important start-up funds to get this program, aptly named Building Horizons, off the ground. With the help of local contractors, suppliers and construction-related businesses, Building Horizons started students constructing three low to moderate-income homes each school year. At the end of the year those students applied for and received entry-level positions in the local building industry.

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the trades, workshops and jobsites of local business, and perhaps more importantly, it organizes one of the most under-utilized resources in our community: our youth.]

BUYING INTO THE PLAN

Schools, businesses and municipalities benefit greatly from the Building Horizons program. However, getting everyone to buy in and contribute their resources was the key to getting the program off the ground. Under the leadership of Joe Sitko, an educator from Los Angeles turned custom homebuilder, Building Horizons began to make the community contacts that are the life-blood of grassroots organizations. For almost 13 years, Sitko specialized in alternative education programs with the Cleveland, Ohio public schools where he worked with at-risk students. Bargaining that everyone who had a stake in the success of the program also had resources to offer, Sitko quickly began assembling the huge community jigsaw puzzle that continues to be the program's bedrock of support.

Remarkably, that process was a lot smoother than some people might believe. Benefiting from the personal attention of forward-thinking industry figures, such as Bob Perryman, Vice President of Operations at Sunrise Colony Company, and with help of their corporate sponsorship as well as Del Webb's Sun City Palm Desert, the program was able to put together a healthy list of participating subcontractors. These local and regional businesses were willing to provide reduced-cost materials and labor in addition to many outright donations from drywall to windows to concrete finishing. They also gave their expertise and support during the actual construction of the houses.

Local contractors, interested in hiring Building Horizons graduates, provide specialized help in the form of soil tests, termite pre-treats, plumbing and electrical wiring. These tradesmen see the wisdom in working hand-in-hand with the students to complete the houses, since they are able to offer work to the students showing the most promise in their trade. Many of these companies continue to provide support and expertise to Building Horizons year after year.

Local municipalities and government offices have also had a great deal to contribute. The City of La Quinta, an early supporter of the program, had redevelopment monies and no-interest construction loans to offer. Building Horizons receives a no-interest construction loan from the City of La Quinta, which it pays back at the end of the year when the houses are sold. In addition, qualifying homeowners receive a subsidy that lowers monthly home payments to more affordable levels.

Another early supporter was the Riverside County Office of Education, which agreed to start a Regional Occupations Program (ROP) course and pay for the teachers. This has been a boon to the program. Building Horizons is now accepted high school course work with an approved curriculum that allows students to earn thirty units towards high school graduation.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the program is that enthusiastic young men and women contribute their energy and put in thousands of hours of good, old-fashioned hard work to see these houses to completion. In addition to receiving the thirty credits for the year, students

qualify for Americore Scholarships based on their community service contribution.

After six years the jigsaw puzzle has grown to encompass over one hundred business and program contributors; a staff of five; four municipalities; the cities of La Quinta, Palm Desert, Mecca, and soon Palm Springs; three part-time teachers provided by Riverside County; four school districts; two private schools; and many non-construction-related business contributors. Many of these diverse stakeholders come together at the Key Ceremony in June, where students present house keys to the proud new homeowners. Last year, Steven Sample, President of the University of Southern California congratulated the students on their recent successes. In his keynote address he commented on the demonstration of pride and satisfaction reflected in the faces of the contractors, suppliers and supporters in attendance.

Not everyone who completes the Building Horizons program becomes a permanent contributor to the construction industry, but many do. Some students go on to study engineering, planning and architecture at four-year colleges, while others attend technical schools to learn a specific trade. Many Building Horizons graduates are very quickly working their way into key positions in local companies, and at least a few have started their own businesses. Each year, this program gives 50 to 60 interested students a secure path into the trades, workshops and jobsites of local business, and perhaps more importantly, it organizes one of the most under-utilized resources in our community: our youth. All the students benefit from Building Horizon's on-going focus on crucial team building, job search, résumé preparation, financial planning and interviewing skills, regardless of the profession they choose.

Facing tight labor markets, insufficient affordable housing and a lack of student vocational training, the community in the Coachella Valley decided to support what many believe to be one of the most innovative educational programs in the nation. But there is still much to do. While entry-level workers are hard to find, it is the skilled journeymen with years of training whom employers urgently need. Today's journeymen are yesterday's laborers, and if we are to solve the rampant labor problems in the building industry, it behooves us to grow our own labor now, so that in the future, we may reap what we have sown. A more plentiful, skilled and flexible labor force will not be created overnight. It must be carefully cultivated.

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