



IT'S A WRAP Still wrapped in white Tyvek, Academy of Construction & Design students prep the micro-house for its protective Hardie Board siding.

PHOTO CREDIT: ACAD

BUILD A (MICRO) HOUSE, BUILD A FUTURE

Go big, or go home. It's an adage well suited for the students of the Academy of Construction & Design at Cardozo Education Campus. In 2012, they constructed the first student-build house in the District of Columbia.

By **Arnesa A. Howell**

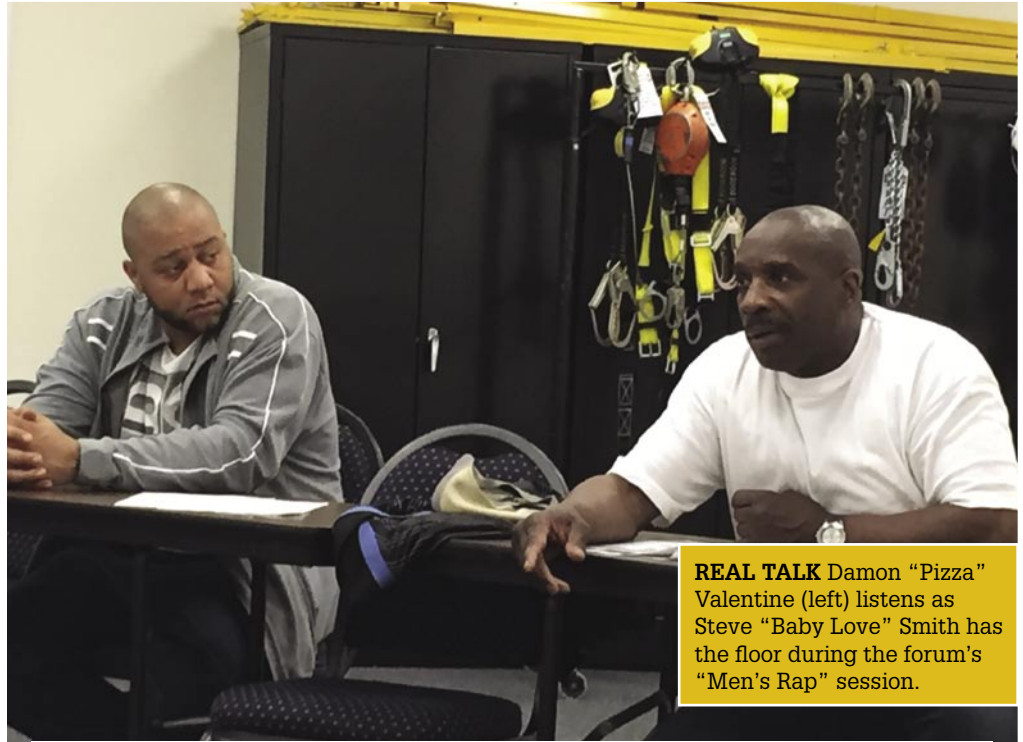
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MAKING STRIDES: JOBS COALITION ACCOMPLISHMENTS



While raising awareness of workforce challenges and potential barriers to employment, the JOBS Coalition and its members have combined their resources and industry expertise to achieve the following results:

- Built the Bellevue Resource Center, a program facility serving the hard-to-reach, hard-to-employ, and returning ex-offender populations. The Center was completed on September 30, 2003.
- Guided the creation of the Construction & Design Academy at Cardozo, providing District students access, training, and preparation for careers in the construction industry and trades after graduation. The Academy officially opened in September 2005. □



REAL TALK Damon "Pizza" Valentine (left) listens as Steve "Baby Love" Smith has the floor during the forum's "Men's Rap" session.

SECOND CHANCES: EX-OFFENDER FORUMS ENCOURAGE PEER SUPPORT, EMPLOYMENT STABILITY

It's just after 9 a.m. on a Saturday morning, and two construction workers are already seated at the tables inside the Miller & Long Cantrall Training Center in Bethesda, Maryland. They're dressed weekend casual – a white short-sleeved tee for one and a light gray jacket for the other; both wear blue jeans. No work, no hard hats. For them and four other formerly incarcerated employees, this day off means coming together for a returning citizens forum about their daily struggles on – and off – the job.

By **Arnesa A. Howell**

Surrounded by fellow workers at his first forum, Dartangan "Tang" Page, 20, expressed frustrations over a recent incident when his timeliness on the site was questioned. His experience sparked a conversation over attendance and workplace communication with job foremen, among key issues workers face when transitioning back into the workforce after serving time.

"I lived in Montgomery County, I'm in the sticks. There's only one bus I could catch when I first started that could get me anywhere near the job site on time," said Dairon "Bo" Upshur, a safety manager at Miller & Long, remembering when he took a 5:30 a.m. bus that got him to work "an hour and some change" early. On a separate job, he got up at 5:30 a.m. but "no matter what" could not get to the site on

time. Those experiences, he said, made him work towards getting a car. He's had three since working at Miller & Long.

Damon "Pizza" Valentine, 38, also chimed in, encouraging Page to stay focused in challenging times. Valentine is an "older brother" to Page, who's been on the job about a month as a carpenter helper. "If he wasn't there during the couple times I got angry at the job, I probably wouldn't have my job right now," said Page. "I'm thankful that he's here to help me and guide me through these situations."

These men shared their experiences – and advice – as part of "Men's Rap," the most popular segment of the forum, where employees can vent and air their frustrations in a healthy way and get positive feedback from their peers

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Micro-House *Continued from page 1*

By the following year, the students had moved on to become contributors to the renovation of their high school. Now, they are tackling another project with big impact, but on a smaller scale – literally.

More than 20 Academy students are constructing a micro-house, a 160-square-foot home on trend with minimalist living and shrinking the environmental footprint.

“More is not always better,” said Academy Director Shelly Karriem of the house, still under construction and on display as part of the Micro Showcase, highlighting innovations in sustainable, micro-sized living. “You can have exactly what you need in a smaller space.”

Karriem added that she hopes this project will help redefine the “American Dream” for the students working on the project. “You can still live well without a McMansion,” said Karriem, referencing the supersized homes that have sprouted up in the suburbs. “Students can learn a valuable lesson to be kind to the earth.”

Another perk: keeping the skills the students have gained studying career and technical education at the Academy “fresh and sharp.” Besides using their construction skills, the juniors and seniors involved in the program are utilizing what they’ve learned about micro-building design and installation methods, added Karriem. According to the D.C. Students Construction Trades Foundation, which is funding the project, participating students have completed Occupational Safety and Health Administration training for “materials handling and storage, electrical safety, welding and cutting, hand and power tools, and other work site safety procedures.”

With its compact size, the micro-house is limited to student teams of six at each visit. Since the kickoff of this latest “Build a House, Build a Future” project on March 19, the students have already erected the home’s exterior walls. Now, they’re looking forward to incorporating innovative features into the module-style home like solar panels and a rainwater collection system.

The plans for the interior include a loft-style sleeping area, storage space over the entryway, and multi-use furnishings for small spaces (like a dining table that converts to a coffee table). And the designs are still evolving. The original plan included a v-shaped roof, but was changed to a barn-style shape to keep the open concept. “As we go, some things need to be tweaked,” said Karriem.

She added that future plans for the micro-house – expected to be completed June 15 – include selling or donating the house. □

The micro-house project is located at 21 Evarts Street, NE in Washington, D.C. For more information, visit the Micro Showcase website at: <http://www.microshowcase.com>.



MONEY MATTERS 101 Otto Girr (left) and Luis M. Campos, part of Miller & Long’s HR team, stress the importance of saving money and being financially fit.

Second Chances *Continued from page 1* and company management, according to Otto Girr, vice president of human resources for Miller & Long Concrete Construction.

“We try to address topics that we see will help the guys develop positive habits and communication skills that will keep them successful,” said Girr.

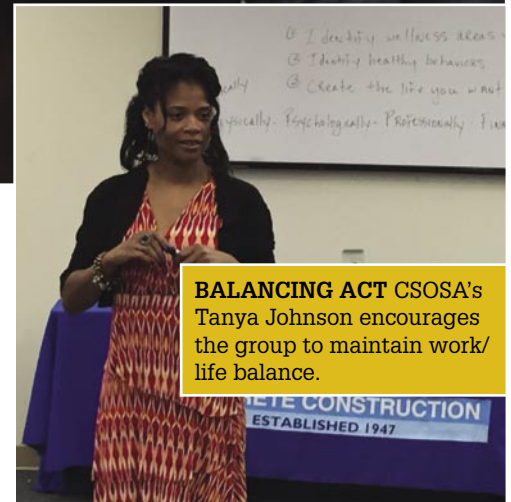
Although Page was the youngest member of the group this day, every man in the room had once walked in his work boots. Because of this, forum participants are comfortable having an open dialogue spanning work and life issues, including health and wellness, money management, conflict resolution and peer communication. Since the voluntary discussions started in April 2011 to help new hires stay successfully employed, Miller & Long has seen an increase in retention of qualified workers.

“We have not only had more employees remain employed, but they have been promoted to higher positions of authority and responsibility,” said Girr, noting that turnover for returning citizens is dropping and is no longer three times higher than that of non-offenders.

Each One, Reach One

Kenny Glover is one of those success stories. Now a human resources specialist with Miller & Long, Glover started out as a carpenter helper in 2003 (*see Leading By Example story, page 3*). He knows firsthand the benefits of having a safe space to unload one’s feelings.

“It gives them an outlet to talk. Me being an ex-offender myself, I always needed a release point. I needed someone to talk to,” said Glover, who has lived the stories playing out in many of



BALANCING ACT CSOSA’s Tanya Johnson encourages the group to maintain work/life balance.



PEER COMMUNICATION Keith Gaffney (right) tells Dartangan “Tang” Page and other forum participants: “This is a real man type of atmosphere.”

these men’s lives. “You got issues you need someone to relate to, and this forum helps them to get all those issues out because our goal is to keep guys employed in a stress-free environment.”

And the forum’s goals reach beyond the present. Girr adds that they are also working to reduce recidivism rates. “Research has shown that the longer a returning citizen remains employed, the less likely he is to be reincarcerated,” he said.

Just days earlier, Keith Gaffney, 31, had received his forklift license. With Miller & Long since July 2014, he credits the returning citizens

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ON THE J-O-B Kenny Glover (right) on the job site with carpenter Rosario Bonilla at 601 Massachusetts Ave., NW in Washington, D.C. in June 2014.

PHOTO CREDIT: MILLER & LONG

LEADING BY EXAMPLE: GLOVER SAYS EX-OFFENDERS MUST 'WANT TO CHANGE'

By Arnesa A. Howell

Ask the day his life turned around, and Kenny Glover answers easily: Sept. 25, 1996. It's a date seared into his mind. The day he knelt in his cell at the correctional treatment facility in D.C. while serving out the remainder of a six-year sentence for attempted robbery and burglary. On a Wednesday – after years struggling with crack cocaine and a cycle of incarceration that started at the age of 11 – he'd finally been “broken.”

“My mom wouldn't answer the phone; she wouldn't send me no money. It was just me and God,” remembers Glover, now 47. “I just got

on my knees and prayed.”

Almost 19 years later, Glover is in a different and better place. He's exchanged drugs and idle time that he readily admits led him to “criminal activity with a cocktail of crack cocaine, PCP, marijuana and alcohol” for mentorship and 12-hour-plus days with the construction company Miller & Long. There, he works in the human resources department. It's the company where he started out as a carpenter's helper in 2003, making \$10 an hour.

Nowadays, Glover faces a different set of challenges: helping other formerly incarcerated men build their own success stories. As an HR

specialist at Miller & Long, Glover does everything from doling out advice to younger guys new to working in the belly of a construction site, known as the pit, to transporting workers to health clinics and drug rehabilitation programs. Of course, he recruits for the company as well. Glover also leads regular discussions during ex-offender forums hosted at Miller & Long headquarters in Bethesda, Maryland. During these sessions, returning citizens have an open forum to discuss work and life issues, and are offered resources to help them succeed on the job (*see Second Chances story, page 1*).

“As returning citizens, there are already roadblocks in your way. You gotta let other people help,” explains Glover. He knows the hurdles these men face, because as a two-time felon, he needed a network when he was released in 2002.

For Glover, that started with the Rev. Donald Isaac, who headed the East of the River Clergy, Police, Community Partnership. “He gave me an opportunity,” says Glover, who worked for \$6.25 an hour sweeping and cleaning up around the nonprofit's office on First Street in Southeast Washington, D.C. When the grant money ran out, Glover says he had a chance encounter with John McMahan, chairman of Miller & Long. Soon thereafter, he started in construction.

It's an industry, he continues, that is hard work and stressful. So his goal is to keep men on the job while helping them deal with their issues – whether that's drug addiction, anger management, financial or otherwise. According to Glover, however, the biggest obstacles to keeping ex-offenders employed are drug use and simply getting guys to show up for work. “That's how we lose a lot of guys,” he admits. “They have to want to change.”

That inner desire to change is what has kept Glover from serving more time behind bars. “I wanted something better. I didn't want to be no skid row bum,” he says. “Looking at a lot of older guys that were in prison ... I didn't want to be like that.”

No easy task for someone who smoked his first joint at 11 years old and started breaking into houses by the time he was 12. “My father wasn't there. I didn't have a father figure or brother to look up to,” says Glover, noting that his mother, Barbara, raised him “right” and he never lived in the projects. “She couldn't teach me the things a young black kid living in Southeast needed to know.”

Glover has learned a lot over the years, including how to cope when life takes unexpected turns. In a 2005 article in *The Washington Post*, Glover said that by the age of 40 he wanted to be a crane operator, and married with a family and home. While he had an eight-month stint working the crane, he is still working on the other goals. And he still lives in Southeast and is focused on his career at the company that gave him a chance.

“This is my longevity. I don't have to put on tools no more or be out in the sun all day,” says Glover, who plans to rack up at least 25 years at Miller & Long. “I plan on retiring there.” □

JOBS Coalition Pathways

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forums for helping him rebuild his life. “This is what I need,” said Gaffney. Within the next five years, he aims to work in an office, sport a suit and use his “mind more” than his hands.

In the meantime, these forums keep him positive. “They keep me in an optimistic mind frame when it comes time to go to work,” said Gaffney, noting that they help him deal with situations on the job site, at home and in the streets. “When you just remember what someone else told you and then when you see guys that come to work ... who still here, and you see how they evolved by coming to these forums, it shows that something works.”

To Your Health

Led by Glover, the May 9 forum covered numerous aspects of coming home, finding employment and living day-to-day. This session tackled the issues of friends and family asking for money, work and life attitudes, coping with conflict at work, language barriers between workers and foremen, savings and retirement, as well as attendance and transportation challenges.

These forums regularly have guest speakers to address these topics, and for the latest session, Glover invited a resource from the District’s Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency. Tanya Johnson, vocational development specialist of Community Justice Programs for CSOSA, discussed wellness and its personal impact on the

men’s lives. She engaged attendees by asking them how they defined wellness and how well they did with staying emotionally, physically, socially and financially healthy. She asked questions like: Everybody getting annual checkups? Does everyone have someone he can talk to? What things are you doing professionally to build yourself up?

“Experience professionally, training and networking are key,” said Johnson. On the personal level, she urged attendees to do an activity or something they enjoy once a week. “Hang out with friends or family, go to a comedy show.”

Johnson also encouraged everyone to complete a self-assessment to evaluate his overall well-being.

Tips for Success

Miller & Long’s human resources team offered money management tips that could help its formerly incarcerated employees long term. Girr urged workers to set up bank, retirement and credit union accounts. “If you don’t develop the good habits now, you will regret it later on,” stated Girr, before offering to help those who don’t already have bank accounts.

When asked how many employees were participating in a 401(k), few raised their hands, showing the importance of more workshops about financial sustainability. Girr encouraged workers to start small – setting aside \$10 to \$20 a week from their pay – to build their retirement funds. It’s a challenging prospect for many, who

oftentimes have responsibilities like child support or are already concerned about tax withholding from their paychecks. “Most people don’t do 401(k) because they say, ‘Oh my gosh, I can’t afford to pay my bills now.’ That’s the wrong way to look at it,” Girr said. “Start young and you’ll be in a much, much better place.”

Another hurdle these men face is being asked for money by family and friends. “Don’t help people to the point that you hurt yourselves,” stressed Girr. “Learn to say, ‘No.’ You have to take care of yourselves financially.”

While the forums have made significant strides in keeping workers who regularly attend employed, there is still much left to accomplish. According to Glover, housing referral resources remain slim. “We can send them to a shelter, but that’s like an institution because it’s an open bed place,” he said, noting shelters have a dorm setting like many prisons.

Still, the success of the returning citizens forums is seen in the accomplishments of the men who come to work each day. For Valentine, an apprentice carpenter who has been attending since August 2014, the forums are place of “brotherly love.”

“I don’t have to bite my tongue. I can express everything that’s on my heart,” said Valentine, a self-proclaimed “people person” whose long-term goal is to join Miller & Long’s human resources team. “It’s a second chance in life for something positive.” □



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