

LI program helps minority youths prepare for union apprenticeships

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Femi Ayodele is on the path to a middle-class life after a string of low-paying jobs because an education program helped him become an apprentice electrician with a union.

Ayodele, 30, from Central Islip, is a graduate of Opportunities Long Island, a free program started by organized labor to prepare young adults from poor communities to compete for the limited number of apprenticeships offered by construction unions each year.

The Hauppauge-based program guarantees its graduates a face-to-face interview for an apprenticeship. Eighty percent of the 30 graduates in the program's first two years are working as apprentices with 15 union locals on the Island and in New York City.

"People who come from nothing — a low place in life, whether they are homeless or got into trouble — this program gives you the opportunity to change," said Ayodele, an apprentice with Local 25 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers union. "I now have a career . . . [and] I have big plans for my future."

Training experts said Opportunities teaches critical "soft skills," such as arriving on time, being mentally prepared for work and following instructions from people with backgrounds that differ from the students'.

Graduates also know what their apprenticeship entails because they've spent six of the program's eight weeks at union training centers trying some of the tasks of a carpenter, bricklayer, sheet metal worker and other construction occupations.

Opportunities is an initiative of the Nassau-Suffolk Building and Construction Trades Council, which represents 59,000 union workers, and the Long Island Federation of Labor, an umbrella organization of unions with 250,000 members.

The program is among 31 apprenticeship preparation courses recognized by the state Department of Labor. Sixteen are based in New York City, and most focus on construction or manufacturing. The Northeast Regional Council of Carpenters runs the only other local course, in Hauppauge.

Separately, pre-employment courses in manufacturing and utilities are offered by local colleges, according to the Workforce Development Institute, a not-for-profit group based in Albany.

“The most successful programs are ones where the employers design the training and are engaged with the candidates,” said Rosalie Drago, the institute’s Long Island director.

Securing work for unions on the large development projects proposed for Hempstead Village, Huntington Station, Ronkonkoma and Brentwood was the motivation for starting Opportunities, the program’s founders said.

Community leaders are insisting that the developers of these projects sign “community benefits” agreements requiring that some neighborhood residents who are poor and minorities — but not necessarily union members — be employed during construction.

Unions want their members to work on these projects.

“We created Opportunities Long Island to address the community benefits requirement, and to give disadvantaged people in these communities the skills so that they can continue to work after the project is done — because they are members of the union,” said Richard O’Kane, president of the building trades council.

Opportunities’ graduates are injecting youth into occupations that are graying, and helping to meet the affirmative action goals tied to state registration of apprenticeship programs, O’Kane said.

“We’d like to take a lot more kids into Opportunities Long Island, but there has to be the work for the apprentices to learn on,” he said.

Local construction employment rose moderately in 2016, up 2,600 jobs from 2015, to 76,700, according to the Census Bureau.

However, construction is expected to become one of the region’s fastest-growing industries, with a workforce projected to rise 20 percent between 2012 and 2022, according to state estimates.

The ranks of apprentices are also growing. The Labor Department reported the number of newly enrolled apprentices from the Island climbed 54 percent to 818 last year from 532 in 2011. Statewide, new apprentices jumped 47 percent to 5,399 in the same period.

Of the nearly 700 registered apprenticeship programs in the state, both union and nonunion, 165 are in New York City and on Long Island, according to state records. The number of local residents in all apprenticeship programs last year was 2,489, up 9.4 percent from 2011.

Becoming a union apprentice can be life-changing.

“I was barely getting by,” said Claude C. Malloy, 27, who worked at a nonunion demolition company before enrolling in Opportunities last year. “Now I feel comfortable in paying my bills, and I want to buy a house this year.”

Malloy, who is married with a preschool daughter, earns \$22 per hour, excluding medical, retirement and vacation benefits, as a first-year apprentice with Local 580 of the International Association of Bridge, Structural, Ornamental and Reinforcing Iron Workers. That compares with \$12 per hour and no benefits previously. His pay will rise to \$44 per hour after he completes the three-year apprenticeship.

‘It humbled me’

Malloy, of Huntington Station, said Opportunities gave him the discipline to rise at 3:45 a.m. to be on time for work at a White Plains construction site, and to attend apprentice school two nights a week after work and on Saturdays.

“Opportunities Long Island taught me that you cannot know everything,” he said. “It humbled me, taught me respect, taught me to be on time — to be ahead of time.”

Malloy is among three Opportunities graduates to be accepted into Local 580’s apprenticeship program. Rich Falasca, education director at the Manhattan-based union, said he is open to taking more.

“They stack up very well. . . . I’ve got nothing but great reports on them” from contractors and other union members, he said.

Falasca, who recruits from several apprenticeship preparation programs, likes Opportunities because the students tend to be older, in their mid- to late-20s, and eager for a stable job. Recently, he has enrolled about 60 apprentices per year.

Opportunities and the other preparation courses bring minorities into organized labor, Falasca said. Minorities have represented 58 percent of Local 580’s newly enrolled apprentices in recent years. The union has about 1,850 active members, 42 percent of them minorities.

“It’s such a fallacy to say ‘We only hire our own,’ ” Falasca said. “We are looking to hire people that can do the job. Whatever skin color you are, it doesn’t matter.”

Programs such as Opportunities help students determine whether an apprenticeship is right for them.

“There is real value in helping someone figure out that they aren’t ready for the rigors of an apprenticeship,” said Maureen Conway, a workforce expert with the Aspen Institute, a Washington-based think tank.

Higher wages

Still, becoming a union apprentice means higher wages for a young adult with a high school diploma or its equivalent, according to a 2014 study of a large preparation program based in Manhattan.

The study's author, Columbia University professor Ester R. Fuchs, estimated the lifetime earnings of a minority youth in a construction union was 166 percent higher, or \$1.6 million more, than that of a minority youth working as a fast-food cook.

"Suburbs cannot thrive without creating economic opportunity for the people who have the least," she said.

That's one of the reasons why Opportunities is backed by governments and social service agencies, including the United Way of Long Island and Huntington Town.

The program's yearly budget of \$250,000 comes from state and federal money (via the Workforce Development Institute, Suffolk County Department of Labor Workforce Development Board and Hempstead Town Workforce Development Board), and in-kind support from 20 union locals, according to Roger Clayman, executive director of the Long Island Federation of Labor. He estimated the training cost per student is \$6,000.

Largest class so far

This year's Opportunities class is the largest so far: 21 students. And like their predecessors, they are serious about winning an apprenticeship. Eighty percent arrived 30 minutes early to class on a recent Monday.

"The hands-on lessons really give you a sense of what it takes to do the job," said student Juan D. Escobar, 24, of Uniondale. "At first, I was interested in carpentry, but then I learned about all the things a plumber does. . . . I'm now open to everything."

On a recent afternoon, Escobar and the other students tried cutting copper pipe and soldering joints at the plumbers' training center in Bohemia. They were elated when the joints didn't leak under 65 pounds of water pressure.

Overseeing the program is director Erica Rechner, who works for the Hauppauge-based not-for-profit Labor Education & Community Services Agency. She takes daily attendance, arranges visits to training facilities and classroom instruction, and serves as a counselor to students and graduates.

She recruits for Opportunities in the fall, seeking, in particular, students from communities that are targeted for big development projects and have high unemployment and large minority populations.

Applicants must meet many of the same requirements of the apprenticeships they hope to land: be 18 or older, live locally, have a high school diploma or its equivalent, be able to legally work and pass a drug test. More information is available at opportunitieslongisland.org.

Ayodele, the apprentice electrician, credited Opportunities with helping him pass a required union math test, which he had failed in 2011.

His pay as an apprentice is \$17.85 per hour, excluding benefits. It will rise to \$51 per hour upon completion of the five-year union course. He was earning \$12 an hour previously as an instructor in a community development program.

The higher union wages mean Ayodele can pay down credit-card debt and save for his daughter's college education. He also plans to buy a house and help other young people who are trying to gain a high school diploma and job skills.

One of Ayodele's first work assignments as an apprentice was helping to build the Dick's Sporting Goods store in Valley Stream. He took his year-old daughter to the store after it opened last year.

"We walked around, and I pointed to the lights in the ceiling and told her, 'I did this,'" he recalled. "It was a great feeling."