

St. Gabe's boys learn trades through YouthBuild

By Lou Baldwin

SPECIAL TO THE CS&T

One might describe YouthBuild as a program that rehabilitates young lives through hands-on rehabilitation of houses. However, there's a lot more to it at St. Gabriel's Hall in Audubon, where for the past few months 31 young men have been traveling in teams to Pottstown to gut and rehabilitate a century-old dwelling for use as a future home for a low-income family.

St. Gabriel's is a facility for adjudicated delinquent boys, and in many cases it's not a matter of rehabilitating their lives, it's building entirely new lives from scratch because of the difficult environments they come from. Although YouthBuild, a mostly federally funded nonprofit that traces back to 1978, has rebuilt 19,000 units of affordable housing around the country since 1988, this may be a first in that the work is being done by incarcerated teens instead of young people directly in the community.

"A project like YouthBuild offers an opportunity for the boys to be fortified with skills so that they will be competitive in the job market when they are finished at St. Gabe's," said Christian Brother Brian Henderson, director of St. Gabriel's Hall, which houses 200 boys. When the St. Gabriel's boys arrived at 404 Jefferson Street in January, their first task was to rip out the entire interior of the tired, old house. In doing this, they worked under the supervision of two mentors with long experience in general construction.

While St. Gabriel's has boys as young as 10, all of those picked for the project are between the ages of 16 and 18, in compliance with work laws. Some of the work, which might be deemed hazardous or too intricate for novices, was done by professionals. For example the boys were not permitted to work on the roof, and licensed plumbers and electricians came in for the replacement of those systems.

"Now we are at the nitty-gritty," said mentor Kirk Yarnall, a former self-employed gen-



(Sarah Webb)

Lamar, Kadir and Jose from St. Gabriel's Hall in Audubon learn construction skills by rehabilitating a house in Pottstown, a project coordinated through YouthBuild.

eral contractor.

At this point, he explained the boys are rebuilding the interior, in some instances reconfiguring rooms through new framing, dry wall and spackling. They will put in all new windows and install exterior siding and work on the renewal of the bathroom and kitchen. When the job is done another house will probably be chosen with work beginning with another group of boys in the fall.

It's probably not work every resident of St. Gabriel's could adapt to, Yarnall, believes. "It takes a certain breed," he said. For them it is a positive experience: "It opens their eyes to what is out there, it will be an entrée into a whole new world. They get a run-over of different trades."

Richard Herman, a retired teacher and contractor who is also a mentor, was supervising young men as they were cutting and installing new studs, putting up the dry wall and spackling.

"I don't do the work, I just tell them how to do it and supervise them," he explained.

The rehab is scheduled for completion by the end of June, and "it looks like we are right on schedule," he said. "I'm impressed; a lot of them have never even picked up a hammer before."

Jose Otero, a St. Gabriel resident, did have previous experience with dry wall. "I did it with my step-dad, he has a business," he said.

Otero is looking forward to a future in the building trades, and although some of the tasks at this house were new to him, he did not find them difficult. "The hardest part was working close to a lot of other people, learning teamwork," he said.

Otero was a bit surprised by the obvious progress made. "The demolition was fun, and I didn't think it would look anything like this. It's starting to look pretty good," he said.

Terrell Burnside, who was busy spackling

and taping, said, "We've learned to use the skill saw, the circular saw and the drills. I've learned a lot here and at St. Gabe's. We're building a house for someone that needs it. I want to do construction when I leave."

When the project is finished and the boys leave St. Gabriel's, they will have an OSHA 18 Construction Worksite Safety Certificate and material for their resume, which will help them get into a trade school if they wish, explained John Mulrone, principal at St. Gabriel's Hall. Meanwhile the boys are earning minimum wage as they work, which also will give them a little nest egg.

Even though virtually all of them are from Philadelphia, the funding comes through Montgomery County. "I can't sing the praises of Montgomery County enough," Mulrone said.

The whole process is workforce-driven and it prepares students for futures in the construction industry or trades. It's all part of what Mulrone calls the "Three Ms" — money, mentors and mission.

The boys learn the legitimate means of earning money; the mentor feature is somewhat akin to the old master and apprentice system; and the mission comes from mission-driven St. Gabriel's that helps make the program effective.

"It's all part of the solution for dealing with the problem of youth violence in the city of Philadelphia," Mulrone said. "Our guys love it, they love physical stuff."

This is just one of several career-oriented programs at St. Gabriel's, Mulrone said.

Others include culinary arts, Microsoft Systems and landscaping.

When the building crew is all finished, boys from the landscaping program will arrive for the exterior finishing touches, and then a lucky resident of Pottstown will have a beautifully finished home.

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