

Learning, earning and serving

YouthBuild 'pioneers' blaze new trails



Student Bronson Gonzales, left, learns the finer points of drywalling from crew supervisor Manny Santos. Santos and AmericaCorps volunteer Tyler Ellifritz have directed the "pioneers" in a home remodeling project on East Sixth Avenue near Sheridan Elementary School.

They gather each morning at 7:30; nine young people who, two months prior, had no idea what to do with their lives. They meet in east-central Spokane, in a classroom built and operated by the Spokane Service Team (SST), the youth employment and training arm of NEWESD 101.

The group of nine, most of them 18 and 19 years old, call themselves the "pioneers" because they are the first Spokane cohort in the federal YouthBuild program. YouthBuild is a community development grant that simultaneously addresses the issues of housing, education, employment, crime prevention and leadership development.

Income-eligible young people work toward their GED or high school

diplomas, learn job skills and serve their communities by building affordable housing.

For the Spokane pioneers, this means a typical week is divided into three parts – roughly 50 percent, classroom; 40 percent, on-the-job construction training; and 10 percent, leadership development. The fall construction project has been a home remodel on the lower South Hill that will be converted into low-income housing.

Thoroughly embedded in every activity is the development of life and career goals. On a recent fall morning, the nine shared personal stories that began with the question: "What would you be doing this morning if you weren't in YouthBuild?"

Answers ran the gamut from "nothing," to "sleeping," to "still being homeless."

Next they were asked, "What do you want to do when you exit the program?" Without exception or hesitation, all nine identified specific goals around continued education and work – some requiring two-year degrees; others, four-year programs.

Indeed, Levi James plans to pursue a career in forestry, Adam Hall wants to become a park ranger and Kaylee Buchanan may pursue a combination career in photography and culinary arts. Home construction intrigues many of the others.

Ultimately, that's what YouthBuild is all about -- building possibility, says Mandy Edwards, SST program manager for NEWESD 101. "For students who've had bad experiences in traditional schools, this program gets them excited again – excited to learn, earn and serve."

Students are paid minimum wage for their construction hours and, upon completion of the program, they receive a \$1,000 stipend toward future education. To maximize support, YouthBuild also coordinates with the Next Generation Zone (story, page 3), to match individual student goals with appropriate jobs and/or additional education and training.

Other participants in the pioneer cohort include Charles Hansen, Dwayne Tolbert, Austin O'Dell, Joe Sturgeon, Nevin Banicki and Bronson Gonzales.

Soon, the pioneers will become veterans, welcoming a new cohort, set to launch in December. Twelve slots will be available in the new group (orientation and screening begin December 7). Applicants must be between the ages of 16-24 and meet specific income criteria. For more information, please contact Tim O'Halloran at (509) 535-1616 or tohalloran@esd101.net.