

## Feature: My School **Builders of a Brighter Future**



Last month, Mayor Cicilline joined Providence students, school officials, and hundreds of construction workers to mark a major milestone in the construction of the new state-of-the-art Providence Career & Technical Academy, located across from Central and Classical High Schools.

When finished, the new 296,000-square-foot educational complex will provide nine vocational career laboratories: carpentry; automotive; electrical; graphic communication; culinary arts; plumbing; heating, ventilation and air conditioning; general construction trades and cosmetology. The learning centers will also include hands-on training facilities such as a student-run restaurant, automotive service garage, broadcast studio and cosmetology salon.

For many involved in the project, the school symbolizes a newer, brighter future for young students in Providence, helping guide them toward career or college paths that obtain good paying jobs. And if there is one group that's got a good handle on this idea, it's the graduates of Building Futures, an innovative program

designed to prepare Providence residents for apprenticeships in the building trades. City News caught up with two of those individuals who are now working on the Providence Career & Technical Academy site to talk about what the project means to them.

### **Are you from Providence?**

Varsana Siavhong: Yes, born and raised here.

Tim Sanders: Yes, not born but raised here.



### **Did you attend Providence schools?**

Varsana: I went to Mount Pleasant High School but I graduated from Ocean Tides, which is a school for troubled youth that's headquartered in Narragansett.

Tim: I went to Central but didn't graduate. I ended up getting my GED.

### **How did you find out about the Building Futures (BF) Program?**

Varsana: A friend of mine from Youthbuild, Pisith Long, introduced me to Andrew (Cortes, Executive Director of Building Futures) and from there, I started classes.

Tim: I found about it through Youthbuild. I went through Youthbuild before and then I went through Building Futures to get in the union.



**What did you do before you joined the program?**

Varsana: I was installing signs with my brother down in Fort Smith, Arkansas.

Tim: I wasn't doing anything. But I wanted to work, so they helped me meet the right people.

**What got you interested in pursuing this career path in the construction trade?**

Varsana: It's a career opportunity. I was working a dead-end job.

Tim: I always wanted to. I just felt like that was what I was going to do. So I just tried to get into the right companies and the union is the best way.

**Tell us about the training process at BF.**

Varsana: I took a couple of courses. We had to do 40 hours of labor course. We studied labor union history and financial literacy.

Tim: At Youthbuild, it was a full time commitment between school and construction training. At BF, I was already working but they were helping me get my foot into the union door. They helped me just get what I needed to get to get in.

**If you hadn't gone through the BF program, what do you think you'd be doing right now?**

Varsana: I don't even know – probably still working installing signs.

**How do you feel about being a part of building a new vocational school for Providence students?**

Varsana: It's just a great opportunity to be involved in this project. Like I said, I went to Mount Pleasant High first before I went to Ocean Tides. So it feels great to be a part of this. It's like building history. It was really nice to see the kids' faces (during the topping-off ceremony on November, 21st). I think there are just so many opportunities that young students have now. We didn't have those kinds of opportunities that they do.

Tim: This is good. My first job in the union is doing this. To me, I'm looking at it like it's gonna' give back to the other kids who will have a better school to go to. If this school was here, I would've gone to it when I was in high school.

**What did you help build in this project?**

Varsana: I'm in the carpentry field and right now we're doing the exterior wall. I've been working on the west side of the building, installing studs and beams and framing so that we can put up the exterior wall. We just came in about six weeks ago – me and my partner Mike.

Tim: I'm doing all the earthwork – foundation, the digging out for the



electrics, and plumbing, and site work.

**Would you recommend the Building Futures program to other young people who might be in the situation you were in when you were their age?**

Varsana: Definitely. This is a great opportunity especially if they want to pursue a construction career. Youthbuild is a good program too. My little cousin just graduated from Youthbuild and he's now in the carpentry union and is working at Blue Cross Blue Shield right now through the same company I work for, H. Carr & Sons.

Tim: I tell people about Building Futures all the time! If I meet somebody who's trying to work, I tell them about it. They actually do try to help you get in there, they just don't talk about it.

**What do you plan to do with what you've learned through this program and where do you want to take your career moving forward?**

Varsana: I see myself getting involved in the kinds of stuff that Building Futures does. That's what I want to pursue really – in the nonprofit area. It's a good learning experience, you know. I'm 27 and I gotta' find a career to be doing.

Building Futures is a joint effort of the Providence Plan, Build RI and YouthBuild Providence. The program is funded through proceeds from Governor's Workforce Board RI, United Way of Rhode Island, Rhode Island Department of Education and Making Connections Providence. For more information on Building Futures, contact Andrew Cortés at (401) 919-5919.