
My City

Providence Builds Workforce of the Future



This week, workforce development in Providence got a big boost from the federal government. Gathered at the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Training Center, members of the state's labor unions joined Mayor Cicilline, Governor Carcieri, and the congressional delegation in celebrating \$3.72 million of stimulus money awarded to the nonprofit Building Futures and their parent agency the Providence Plan. The grant is designed to help prepare local residents for careers in the green

construction industry.

One of the graduates of Building Futures at the event was Providence native Jason Mitchner. Before receiving his training from Building Futures, Mitchner had been cobbling together part-time jobs and small side businesses to make ends meet for himself and his four children. Today he is on the path to building a career as a licensed electrician.

City News asked Mitchner his thoughts on how this new stimulus grant and the training he's received so far will impact his ability to build an even brighter future for himself.

What does this stimulus grant to Building Futures mean for you and your fellow grads?

With the training we're receiving from this grant towards energy training, it puts us ahead of the game. This is all about cutting-edge technology and applications that have yet to be applied here in Rhode Island. That training puts me in a position where I can use it to get a better job, build a career out of it, and maybe train others too. A lot of our jobs are being outsourced outside of the state, and I think that we really need to keep some of that here and training Providence natives is key. That's what's going to help us keep those jobs of the future – a trained local workforce that can handle those skills needed for the green construction industry, and so that companies that come here will invest here.

What was life like for you before you joined the Building Futures program?

I have a background in telecommunications and as a domestic engineer. I'm a single father of four children. I also have two small businesses. I started a production company with my sister, Marisa, and a clothing line that I've been working on for a while. I had to hustle and create jobs and businesses for myself.

What got me started with launching my own businesses was when a couple years ago, I was hired by the Department of Defense in Washington, D.C. to be a network operations center engineer. They do a ten-year background check and I fell short of the ten years by two months into my 12-month probation for a simple charge. But because of that, it set me back a little. It can be a demoralizing if you let it, knowing that I have the skills and the aptitude to fulfill those job requirements but because of poor choices I made – and I don't blame anybody but myself – landing a job with a record is tough. Building Futures saved

me because they have an open door policy for people who have a record. But that's why I started my own businesses, because I had to create some sort of income for my family and myself.

The economy today is also reflective of the jobs that I have. I don't have the capital to go and get the equipment I need for my clothing line, even though my sister and I managed to put on a fashion show for Black History Month last year. Still, all the hustling to find jobs and business opportunities in this economy are what led me to Building Futures.

How did you hear about them?

I went to the North American Laborers Union. Michael Sabotoni was there and I spoke to him. He asked me about my skills and background and I told him about my telecommunications experience. I mentioned to him that I was interested in getting into the electricians' union. That's when he sent me to Building Futures. It's just a remarkable program.

What has this program done for you?

It's just given me a sense of empowerment. To go around and know that you have the skills, the knowledge, and the aptitude to do so many jobs, Building Futures gave me the knowledge to focus on what I really wanted to do. When I go looking around for work, I'm not just looking for a job I'm looking for a career. I see all these job postings and I know I'm capable of doing them, but sometimes you start feeling like you're spreading yourself too thin. So if I stay focused like Building Futures taught me, and work on being an electrician – which is what I really want to do – then I'm well on my way to creating a livelihood for myself.



What are the skills they helped you develop through this program?

They have a number of classes. One of them is on financial management. It teaches you how to manage your bills and live within your means. Another class they offer is on labor history. Many people aren't aware that the labor movement started in Rhode Island. Besides that, it gives you an opportunity to be in the realm of the unions. You get to meet union representatives, rub elbows with them, and pick up on the jargon.

So have you been able to apprentice as an electrician yet?

I'm still apprenticing for Local 99 IBEW. The major holdup is that with any trade, there's a downtime. Unfortunately, right now, we're in that downtime. So I'm just anticipating a call or an opportunity to work as an electrician soon. I know it's coming.

As a Providence native and resident, how do you think a program like Building Futures impacts the city as a whole?

For me, it's empowering. I'm homegrown and I know this city inside/out. I have a passion in me that I know was cultivated here in my home city. I know many people, friends,

neighbors like myself who might get looked over, or singled out, for certain jobs for whatever reason that could really benefit from this program and that need it.

Not to say that there's a cancer in Rhode Island, when it comes to developing the



workforce, but if there was and you really wanted to fix it, I think you need to start within yourself and within our borders. We need to start re-cultivating, redeveloping, retraining, and reinvesting in our own people. This is what Building Futures is doing well.

Anybody who doesn't know about Building Futures should keep their eyes and ears open for them. This is the beginning of something great. They've been around for a number of years but they're getting bigger and better as time goes on. And the more they can prove their success rate I believe that a lot more money will be allotted to them as well. Once they do, I believe it's just going to blow a lot of doors open for many people. I feel like this program is really targeting the right group by targeting those of us who live here and are from Providence.



What are your hopes/aspirations for the future?

In terms of my career, I plan on becoming a licensed electrician. I come to Local 99 as an apprentice.

After sometime, I become a journeyman. After that, I expect to be management. And maybe sometime in the future, I'd like to become a contractor myself here in Rhode Island. That goes back to what I said about using the training I receive here and passing on that knowledge to the next crop of workers.

Words of encouragement for that "next crop" of workers?

I say pursue your goals. Anything you want to attain or accomplish in life requires time and perseverance. My sister and I live by the three Ps: Prayer, Perseverance, and Patience. Without those, you've got a hell of a challenge ahead of you.

For more info on Building Futures, go to <http://www.bfri.org>