



GORMAN TEAMS UP WITH NORTHCOTT TO REBUILD DEPRESSED MILWAUKEE NEIGHBORHOOD



Construction worker at the site of the Northside Housing Initiative

Tony Kearney walks into a classroom in the Northcott Neighborhood House on the north side of Milwaukee. Every seat is filled by 24 men learning construction. Kearney, the Project Director for the 50-year-old nonprofit organization, brings good news.

All of the students have passed the state lead abatement worker test. The class erupts into applause. Kearney is all smiles.

Northcott has partnered with Wisconsin-based developer Gorman & Company on the landmark housing restoration

effort called the Northside Housing Initiative. The project featured the construction of 40 rent-to-own, single family homes on formerly vacant lots and the rehabilitation of a series of existing duplexes to provide an added 40 affordable rental units in the Metcalfe Park and North Division neighborhoods of Milwaukee. This is good news for a community that has been littered with foreclosures and blighted properties.

WHEDA awarded \$951,620 in Low-Income Housing Tax Credits to Gorman in 2010 for the initiative and just over \$1.5 million in credits in 2012. Gorman's Wisconsin Market President Ted Matkom now depends greatly on the Northcott students for the second phase of the project, the acquisition and rehabilitation of 105 single family homes into affordable rental units.

"Northcott is literally training individuals in building homes, in siding, roofing, and carpentry," said Matkom. "The least you can do is provide opportunity for a local entity that hires local residents to work on these projects. It's a great idea."

Christopher Edwards, 41, of Milwaukee, attends a Northcott class wearing a shirt and tie under his overalls. Edwards' expertise is remodeling homes. But like most of the students, he's unemployed.

"I have an impeccable resume," said Edwards. "But I can't find work. I'm here to make myself more marketable, more employable."

Northcott is a refuge for another student, 45-year old Elliott Urquhart of Milwaukee, an unemployed welder.

“I’m surrounded by good people who are sincerely concerned,” said Urquhart. “My goal is to get a respectable wage, own a home and pass it on to my son.”

Both Edwards and Urquhart dream of being contractors someday, but have even greater motivation.

“I will unboard every boarded up house in this city,” Edwards proclaimed. “That’s my aspiration.”

“We’re tired of seeing all those green boards,” Urquhart concurred.

Not everyone shares the same ambition. Northcott’s Kearney says students who swear they aren’t afraid of heights arrive at a worksite and suddenly can’t get on a ladder. For others, the weather can be too hot or cold to work construction. And, half of the students bring baggage in the form of felony convictions.

“We have to take a chance on them,” said Kearney. “If you’re going to revitalize the community, you have to hire from within those who are unemployed. A convicted felon is less likely to recidivate if he has a job.”

Persistence can pay off substantially. Kearney says one former student, who previously had no income, earned \$17,898 this past year and will probably make \$25,000 this year. That type of turnaround is imperative in a community crippled by high unemployment.

The biggest problem with the program isn’t a problem per se. Gorman loses workers that graduate from the program to third party contractors. Since the ultimate goal is finding sustainable employment for the students, the Gorman-Northcott partnership has been a success. A waiting list to get into the classrooms at Northcott has mushroomed to 1,200.

“WHEDA’s Emerging Business program is essential to facilitating small business,” said Gorman’s Matkom. “It’s working just great.”

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