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For youths, trades offer a path to prosperity

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Opportunities



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As I was growing up in a racially diverse neighborhood of mostly middle-class families near the University of Chicago, my late dad - the construction worker - was an anomaly among the many doctors, lawyers, college professors and other degreed professional men in our community.

In Hyde Park, a vibrant and culturally rich community on Chicago's south side, what your father did for a living mattered, and if you could name-drop, it was even better.

So imagine me in this community of kids whose fathers included jazz great Willie Pickens, entertainer Oscar Brown Jr. and Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, and one grandfather named Jesse Owens, the Olympic great.

Thanks to my dad's hard work and my mom's income as a postal supervisor, I had a middle-class upbringing and enjoyed many of the accoutrements of peers whose fathers worked in plush offices and didn't do hard physical labor.

Even though I now am proud of the work that my father did to provide for our family, as a child, I didn't appreciate what he did and the important contribution he made to the community. I remember the shame and embarrassment I would feel whenever Daddy would walk down the street as I was playing with my friends, his hair caked with concrete dust and his clothes covered with dirt and soot from a day's work on a construction site.

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In a good year, with overtime, he pulled in \$70,000 - and that was a lot back in the 1970s.

But these days, Daddy would be a rare commodity - a brother with a paycheck - in some central city neighborhoods where nearly 60% of working-age black males are unemployed or not in the labor force, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.

There's really no respect given to working with your hands in our society, especially as parents and educators more and more are pushing kids to go to college instead of picking up a hammer or a drill.

That's too bad. The trades can provide a wonderful opportunity for young people, particularly for

minority kids for whom a college education might not be in the cards - due to any number of reasons, from lack of finances to lack of confidence and lack of role models or having to serve as alternate baby sitters for younger siblings. A job in the skilled trades could provide the lifeline that young minorities need to lift themselves and their families out of poverty.

Unions and construction employers are scrambling to gear up for one of the most severe labor shortages within the next few years as large numbers of older construction workers retire. The unprecedented construction boom in southeastern Wisconsin offers the promise of good-paying jobs and prosperity for a decade.

But the trouble is, many young people don't want these kinds of jobs. Working with your hands has been denigrated, local construction industry experts say. The common view is that construction is a last resort for people who are street savvy and lack the smarts to go to college.

Kids think the trades aren't good enough for them. But for many, the opposite is true: They aren't good enough for the trades. They don't qualify for apprenticeships because they can't do math or read well enough.

"The message kids are getting is you do the trades when you can't do anything else, from people who don't have a clue of the money you can make," says Randy Crump, president of Prism Technical. Prism, a construction consulting and management company at 6114 W. Capitol Drive, is overseeing the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District's business development training and mentoring initiatives.

Many young people in the central city don't realize their options and succumb to the pressures of urban life, thereby missing out on lucrative careers in construction, says Tyrone Dumas, a longtime community activist and a current official with the Milwaukee Public Schools.

"There's this peer pressure that evokes failure, that says you've got to be in the street life. Construction trades is no longer an honored profession in the black community," says Dumas. "Many of these kids have never seen anybody work. Unless kids get a sense of work ethic or a sense of responsibility, how do you steer young people to any of these opportunities?"

Tyrone Harness managed to escape the tough central city streets without a felony conviction, unlike many of the young African-American men from the struggling north side neighborhood where he grew up. Harness, 28, is a pre-apprentice carpenter for B&D Contracting Inc., a minority-owned construction company based in New Berlin, where he has been employed since last August.

"A lot of African-American men, the majority of us think that something is going to fall into our lap," says Harness, who makes \$15 an hour. "Yeah, it's a dirty job, and sometimes you have to work hard, but would you rather be at home not working at all?"





















Harness says the trade helped him get a grip on life. Now as the father of one child and two stepchildren, he is grateful to have a steady job that provides a family-sustaining wage.

"Before, I worked off and on in temporary jobs. I got tired of it. I wanted more stable work," he said. "I have friends who make excuses that no one will hire them. It's hard to get in, but once you get in and you work real hard, you can make a pretty good living."

In addition to a good-paying job, construction offers opportunities to own and run a business, which could help promote prosperity and economic revitalization. Maybe if young people had more role

models in the community like my father, they would develop more respect for people like him who show that there is dignity in all work, no matter how dirty or physically demanding it is.

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