Summit Academy students, Will Steger break ground on cabin-building initiative in BWCA

By Maricella Miranda | 07/03/14

This summer, students will get real-life construction experience using recycled materials, while replacing a cabin at the center that burned down three years ago.

William Moreland experienced a lot of firsts as he wrapped up his studies at Summit Academy OIC, a community-based vocational training and job placement program in North Minneapolis.

Along with learning about construction math, building materials and power tools, the 36-year-old Texas-native became one of the first academy graduates to build a cabin adjacent to the
Boundary Waters for renowned polar explorer Will Steger. Moreland and his classmates started building the cabin in late June at the Steger Wilderness Center in Ely, Minn.

“I got really inspired being able to go meet someone like Will Steger,” Moreland said, who visited the Boundary Waters for the first time. “I look at it as development and personal empowerment. It’s just a real exciting opportunity that I’ll be able to talk about for years.”

The project is part of a new partnership between the Steger Wilderness Center and Summit Academy. This summer, students will get real-life construction experience using recycled materials, while replacing a cabin at the center that burned down three years ago.

Steger and Louis King II, the founder of Summit Academy, hatched the idea about eight years ago while teaming up for H.I.R.E. Minnesota, a program aimed at ensuring that public investments in infrastructure and renewable energy help transition people from poverty and reduce racial disparities. For the cabin project, Steger provided a week of room-and-board and building materials, while the students gave their carpentry expertise and labor.

“Building little cabins in the wilderness is just a great experience,” Steger said. “People want a job, they don’t want to live in poverty. They want to work. What it’s really about for myself is I have a real commitment to the inner city. It’s about getting opportunities here.”

Moreland, who lives in Minneapolis, used to drill oil rigs. When he became dissatisfied with his job, he started looking for new career opportunities. That’s when his brother told him about the Pre-Apprentice Carpentry Program at Summit Academy.

The two-phase program provides students with job readiness skills in the construction trade through classroom and hands-on training. The first 10 weeks covers general industry training, while the second 10 weeks provides hands-on training.

The program costs $5,400, but tuition is generally paid for through a combination of federal financial aid, donations and foundation grants, according to Steve Shedivy, director of marketing at Summit Academy. Students don’t have out-of-pocket costs or loans to pay back.
Typically, students using the program are low-income adults who are unemployed or under-employed, Shedivy said. They must have a minimum of a high school degree or GED and pass an entrance exam. Students are selected based on interviews and academic performance.

The selection process can be stringent, Shedivy added.

Upon graduation, students receive an undergraduate certificate and have the skills to work at union shops as pre-apprentices, said Jim Jordan, operations supervisor in the carpentry department at Summit Academy. Jordan is leading the cabin project.

Moreland and five other students built the cabin’s 16-by-16-foot structure during the weeklong trip, starting June 15. A second group of students will return in early July to complete the interior and exterior. The cabin will house up to two visitors at the center, Steger said.
Jess Hill, 23, of Mounds View, also joined Moreland for the first cabin-building trip. Hill grew up camping in the Boundary Waters. She also took on minor building projects as a girl, making plant box and shingles with her family. Hill said she jumped on the chance to work with Steger — whom she admires for his dog-sledding expeditions across Antarctica.

“I was right on top of it,” Hill said. “When I heard that we were building a cabin for someone as big as Will Steger, I wanted to go.”

After graduating from Summit Academy, Hill hopes to find a job with a union contractor, learn as much as she can from others, and eventually become a foreman.

Moreland wants to find a job in union carpentry, too.

“I want to gain work experience,” he said. “I want to build a reputation and move forward in this career. I really want to make it work for me. I’m just going to own it, do it, and teach others.”

Summit had a 71 percent job placement rate for students who completed the pre-apprentice program between 2012 and 2013, according to the program’s website.

Steger said he plans to have more building projects for Summit Academy students in the future.

“It’s a really neat experience,” he said. “The friendships you build here are really important. I think some of these people will probably stay in touch too.”

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COMMENTS (2)

In BWCA?
SUBMITTED BY MARY TOME ON JULY 3, 2014 - 9:42AM.
While this may be a great opportunity for these folks, I hope they know they are NOT in the BWCA! The title and Will Steger's comment about "building little cabins in the wilderness" are both very misleading.

A cabin
SUBMITTED BY EDWARD BLAISE ON JULY 4, 2014 - 9:18PM.
16' on each side is exceedingly small and, yes, it is adjacent to the boundary waters and if someone wants to find fault with that they may be wound a little too tight.