Members of minorities making modest inroads in the trades

Isaiah Campbell, a black electrician trainee at Hunt Electric Corp., is the emerging future of the historically white Twin Cities construction trades.

Campbell, 32, spent most of 2015 at work in the two under-construction Wells Fargo buildings that are part of the $400 million Downtown East project that includes a hotel, parking ramp and apartment complex.

He is a graduate of Summit Academy OIC, the north Minneapolis nonprofit that trains adults for construction and health care jobs. Campbell makes about $16 an hour, the same as he was making as a suburban school custodian for several years.

The potential as a skilled trades worker is much greater. Campbell could be making up to $40 an hour as a veteran electrician within several years.

“At Summit, I learned about building materials, how to use power tools, safety and more over about five months, and my score was high enough to get into the electrical program,” Campbell said. ’I’m a ‘pre-apprentice,’ studying to be an electrician.

“I needed to do something different, for me and my family, and this has opened doors for me. Summit Academy was the start-up kit for the journey.”

The construction industry will need more Isaiah Campbells. And there’s finally some evidence that members of minorities are making modest inroads into the construction fields, traditionally almost as much a white bastion as the corner office.

The number of black and other minority construction employees in the Twin Cities area rose 80 percent over the past five years to 3,769 workers, according to the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development.

That’s significant. But minorities still represent less than 6 percent of that overall employment group. And they now constitute about 25 percent of the population in the seven-county Twin Cities region, according to the Metropolitan Council.

White job growth was up about 30 percent during the five years of economic recovery in construction to 65,877 jobs last year. Blacks, the single-largest minority group in the construction trades, doubled their representation to 1,652 jobs over five years.

Steve Hine, a labor market economist for the state, said the demographic trends are undeniable. The Twin Cities construction industry will need trained minority workers to sustain growth in an industry that is projected to lose older white workers faster than they can be replaced by 2020.

“An industry that has historically relied on young white men is going to have to change its [hiring] practices,” Hine said in an e-mail last week.

That’s slowly starting to happen.

Late last year, Ryan Cos. said it is working with Summit Academy to supply trainees on the privately financed portions of the Downtown East project. Ryan and other contractors, such as Mortenson, the builder of the Twins and Vikings stadiums, long have had to meet minority-hiring standards set by local governments on those publicly financed projects. It can range to a third of the workers, depending upon job category.

Neither Summit nor Ryan would quantify their agreement. But it’s significant because it demonstrates that goals will be set on big private projects as well.
“The numbers are moving up,” said Collin Barr, a Ryan executive. “We are attracting more people of color and women. Summit is a key partner, but one of many as we increase inclusion of more people of color and women.”

In addition to the 17-story Wells Fargo buildings, Ryan is working on a 194-unit apartment complex at 5th Avenue S. and S. 5th Street, adjacent to the publicly funded park that is part of the Downtown East-stadium development with at least some private money.

Louis King, a former Army artillery officer, is the CEO of Summit. He focused its training programs on construction and health care about 15 years ago because state demographers said they would be areas in short supply by now.

Summit produces several hundred construction trainees annually.

King initially was discouraged because Summit was placing a very low percentage of construction trainees. But, starting about a decade ago, he started to privately cajole and publicly exhort construction and union brass and elected authorities to set and meet often-ignored minority hiring goals on big, publicly funded road-and-bridge and stadium projects.

The placement numbers are starting to move slowly for Summit, which is funded mostly with grants and contracts, and other training agencies.

“The partnership with Ryan meets a lot of needs,” King said. “Many of the trades are looking at shortages in personnel and these will endure even during downturns, because of retirement of baby boomers.

“Ryan is shifting from compliance to a workforce-replacement model. This project with Ryan, on the [Downtown East] project that had no goals, sets the bar higher. ... Ryan needs a worker pipeline ... as do their subcontractors. Ryan is leading by example. We and Ryan have mutual interests. Mine is putting people to work.”

Barr and King said Ryan is not paying Summit job-placement fees. Ryan provides advisory and general financial support to nonprofit Summit.

King said Summit places more than 90 percent of its trainees in construction, health care or other employment after graduation following five months or more of education and training.

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