

Work NOW and SOAR Programs: Breaking Down Barriers to Entry By Montrie Rucker Adams, APR



They entered the room, each wearing something red, the Urban League’s signature color. Walking single file, heads held high. Some faces were bearing smiles, others anticipation.

For the SOAR July, 21, 2017 centennial graduating class, the end of their six-week journey is just the beginning.

“As I reflect on my time spent with the Work NOW: Construction Initiative and SOAR Program, I tend to view my process the same as a flower...with petals that were damaged and withering...” began Danesha M. Jones as she spoke to her fellow students and well-wishers at their graduation ceremony. Jones continued her flower analogy by stating that she needed a “new pot” and participating in the program caused the dead petals to wither away. She remained dedicated and put in the necessary work and time to see progress. “I started to bloom in the eyes of others and became a new and improved flower with new petals,” she said.

Jones’ story can be mirrored by her other five classmates. Wynn Tyler Hines, Vernon M. Sweatte, Linus U. Undiandeye, Sirjhon T. Williams and Alonzo R. Woodruff unanimously spoke about the life transformation that took place during their journey.

Solid Opportunities for Advancement and Retention (SOAR) is the ULGC’s most recent enhancement to its workforce development programs. It was created to assist the unemployed, underemployed, veteran and ex-offender in their quest for better employment opportunities. Program components include: Resume Development,

Career Exploration, Self-Exploration, Effective Communication, Conflict Management, Business Etiquette, Employment Readiness, and Career Placement. The Work NOW program includes a four-month retention program with additional support services - regular educational and one-on-one sessions.

Each of the six participants, their ages ranging from 20 to 42, came into the program with pre-conceived ideas. They didn't know what to expect, however they all emerged changed individuals.



At 20, Hines was the class' youngest. He had experience working in the construction field and said, "being able to get additional hands-on experience is most valuable."

Jones had a background working as a general residential laborer. "I loved the fact that the Urban League was able to connect with us and relate to us on different levels," she said. "I can apply the information to anything in my life."

Sweatte mentioned that the program "really helped me find out who I am. It helped me know that I can do anything I put my mind to."

Undiandeye, who once served time for CCW, understood the program was a fast track into construction. "It's an opportunity to take care of my family by doing something I was doing anyway. I like working with my hands," he said.

Williams reflected on his most useful takeaway, the "bad/sad cup, good/happy cup" lesson. "You have two cups in life, good and bad. You have to empty your bad cup, which are the negative things in your life. A lot of the bad stuff that happened in your past may come out when you get older. You have to fill your good cup," Williams pensively explained.



Woodruff had the opportunity to “find and better myself. I learned how to conduct myself and speak properly in interviews. The opportunity is now,” he said. “Construction is a growing field, and the opportunities are everywhere. You will never be without a job.”

“Our mission is to empower communities and change lives,” said Marsha Mockabee, president and CEO of The Urban League of Greater Cleveland. “I feel that personally for this group. This time I had a chance to meet with them in a personal way. I’ve seen amazing transformation,” she said. “I am excited about their future. Four of the participants are now employed with CEA members. Success is not a destination, but a journey. We are one step in the path toward success.”

The Work NOW Construction Initiative is designed to expose individuals that have completed the SOAR soft skills and job readiness component to the construction industry. The participants are introduced to construction, have sessions in math, blueprint reading, safety, power tools, apprenticeship programs, construction sites and employer interaction. Social service assistance and case management is also provided.



The graduates’ journey continues with career opportunities already underway for several. Trafftech has Hines and Williams on board. Jones is interning with MJP Trucking and The Great Lakes Construction Company on the Opportunity Corridor Section 2 project.

Woodruff is starting his career at Precision Construction.

As an indication that Jones was one of the program’s standout students, she received an additional four offers for employment. At MJP Trucking, she works with the accounting team and office staff assisting with filing, documenting, office management and invoicing. When asked how she handles her obligations, Jones said that her schedule is

different every week. “At Great Lakes, I attend meetings and help them think of ideas for community opportunities. I’m also working at the CEA, assisting with the ACE alumni. I am responsible for reception work, updating the database and contacting the alumni,” mentioned Jones.

“I attribute my opportunities to the SOAR program. A lot of the sources came through the companies affiliated with the CEA. I’m enjoying my internships and looking forward to what’s coming next, which is school. I want to study construction management at Tri-C, and maybe transfer to Kent State University,” she said.

Mockabee thanked the Construction Employers Association (CEA) the program’s partner and funder and its executive vice president, Glen Shumate for making the program work, “by working hand-in-hand with us. He had an investment in the program. He is responsible for getting people in construction and allied industries - any kind of industry where there are barriers to entry. Sometimes we have to open doors with persuasion and influence. Sometimes we have to kick in the door. We put our shoulders to the wheel together and pushed the door open,” Mockabee said of the Urban League’s relationship with CEA.

In addition to Mrs. Mockabee and Glen Shumate, all of the graduates sang the praises of Evette Jackson Clark, senior director, education & talent development; Darnell Carter, facilitator; Anthony Franklin, math and reading instructor; Daryll Rogers, case manager; and Shanita Stribling “Ms. S.”

Clark gave family and friends in attendance her assessment of each member and ended the program leading the graduates in a chant, “Once an Urban Leaguer, always an Urban Leaguer,” emphatically reminding them that the Urban League will always be there to help them along their journey, wherever it may take them.

It can be said that all six of the graduating class members can echo Jones’ words; they “bloomed and are new and improved flowers with new petals.” They will soon outgrow

their new pots because growth will never change. They now have new soil, water and sunlight.

