

## THINKING IT THROUGH

# Schenectady-WIN a win for the trades

*Sara Foss*



PETER R. BARBER/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

Jie Ma puts up dry wall for the first time at 966 Vermont Ave. in Schenectady on Friday.

Jie Ma is about to graduate from a training program with a job guarantee. But when I ask him why he spent 18 months learning construction, earning his high school equivalency degree, a certificate of employability and sitting through a course in life skills, his answer is surprisingly poetic: "I want to build my dream home."

Ma is 40 and has worked a variety of jobs — in restaurants, at nail salons. Now he's looking forward to an entirely new career, in a field where employers are always searching for skilled, dependable workers.

I met Ma on Thursday morning, when he and fellow classmate Yu fa Marinucci, 48, were putting up sheet-rock in an old garage being converted into a youth center by New Day Christian Empowerment Center on Vermont Ave in Schenectady. They worked under the supervision of Richard Parsons, a licensed contractor who tells me he "painted my way

through college.”

“I enjoy this,” Marinucci said. “I look forward to it.” She gestured at the garage. “I want to make this beautiful.”

Called Schenectady-WIN — the WIN stands for Working In Neighborhoods — the program is the brainchild of Roger Hull, the former Union College president and mayoral candidate.

It combines hands-on and classroom work, in the hopes of giving under-educated low-income adults the skills they need to succeed in construction. As conceived by Hull, students need to be taught how to build a house, but also the value of showing up for work on time and being prepared.

“There are no quick fixes,” Hull said. “You’re not going to take someone who does not have a high school degree and put them to work and expect them to be a success.”

I wrote about Schenectady-WIN in 2016, shortly before Hull launched it with the help of Rockie Mann, a Schenectady resident who owns JAFJR Construction Services. Mann told me he has trouble finding workers who know what they’re doing — a complaint I’ve heard from other employers in the trades, as well as people looking for good contractors, plumbers and electricians.

Given this shortage of skilled labor, I’ve often wondered why more isn’t done to promote the trades as a viable career path. Schenectady-WIN is a program that does exactly that, which is why I like it.

Schenectady-WIN isn’t the only program that focuses on the opportunities in the trades. Just last week, the city of Schenectady’s Affirmative Action Office launched a new program, in partnership with the SUNY College and Career Counseling Center, that will train low-income residents for jobs in the construction industry.

Schenectady-WIN’s first group of students will graduate in June, with jobs lined up with local businesses. There are five students in this first class, and 16 in the class that just started.

One of those students, Schenectady resident Tony Dukes, told me that he has experience in construction and masonry, but is hoping the class teaches him how to run his own business. He said he’s finding the life skills portion of the program, taught in a classroom at the city school district’s Washington Irving Adult & Continuing Education Center, especially valuable.

“Before you pick up a hammer, you’ve got to get your mind right,” Dukes said.

I was expecting the adults enrolled in Schenectady-WIN to be young, and some of them are. But a number of them are older. Dukes is 60, and Ma and Marinucci are in their forties. All three see the trades as a vehicle to a better life. And they're right to do so.

There are real opportunities in the trades — opportunities people are not always aware of. And while training programs are valuable, some employers are willing to train workers on the job. So there are plenty of pathways to a career in the trades. Hull believes he's created a program that can serve as a model on how to prepare low-income adults for jobs in construction.

And he might be on to something.

The students I met seemed engaged, focused and eager to work.

Schenectady-WIN asks a lot of its students, but there is, as Hull put it, "a light at the end of the tunnel. ... [The construction market] needs people."  
It sure does.

And Schenectady-WIN will help fill this need.

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