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MOUNDS VIEW

Pride and excitement about a new, life-changing career path filled the room at the Mermaid Event Center June 15 at a celebration for 15 graduates of a new apprentice readiness training program sponsored by six Minnesota tribal nations and the Minneapolis Building and Construction Trades Council.

“This was a pilot,” explained the Building Trades’ Jenny Winkelaar. “We’ve had a tribal program through the Cement Masons for a long time but we went from one craft to 11.” Over the 12 weeks of the program, students attended classes and received a hands-on introduction to the work of 11 different building trades.

“Each week we did something different,” said Isaiah RedDay, a member of the Leech Lake tribe. “I liked them all,” he said. “I’m leaning more towards iron work or carpentry.”

Several of the new graduates of the apprentice readiness training program already had been offered apprenticeships at participating craft unions. “I’m excited to get into the benefits of the union, the health insurance, and the camaraderie,” RedDay said.

The Building Trades Tribal Partnership Program was funded by a grant from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development and private contractor donations as well as in-kind donations from the Building Trades, Winkelaar reported.

Participating tribes included: the White Earth, Leech Lake, Bois Forte, Fond du Lac, and Mille Lacs Annishinabe reservations and the Upper Sioux Dakota community.

Participating trades included: Limited Energy, Sheet Metal, Laborers, Ironworkers, Operating Engineers, Pipe Trades, Roofers, Carpenters, Cement Masons and Bricklayers.

One year of planning went into the program, considering the tribes’ needs, the trades’ needs, and the industry’s needs, Winkelaar said. She noted that construction work performed on the reservations is often union work but that there hasn’t been a clear path for tribal members to join the construction trades, whether for work on the reservation or off the reservation. “We wanted better results for the tribes,” Winkelaar said. “We also wanted better results for the trades.”

“Because there were six tribes involved, we needed a managing partner,” Winkelaar noted. Consultants Nicholas Kedrowski and Nyree Kedrowski, of Five Skies, LLC based in Black River Falls, Wisconsin, served in that role and incorporated different tribal customs and cultural-based teaching styles into the program.

“We all come from different tribes so we all have different stories,” Nyree Kedrowski explained. She shared one highlight: “I passed a fishbowl of rocks around. I said, pick one that speaks to you. Give your problems to the rock; it can take it.”



The June 2018 graduates of the new apprentice readiness training program sponsored by six Minnesota tribal nations and the Minneapolis Building and Construction Trades Council.

At the graduation ceremony, the chanting and drumming of the Little Thunder Singers from Black River Falls led off the program, signaling that this was no ordinary graduation.

Graduates told moving, personal stories about their life challenges and how the program represented a new beginning for their lives and their families.

“I was a stay-at-home mom,” said Victoria Archie of the White Earth Objibwe. “In the last few weeks, I learned so much. We’ve learned invaluable skills in a short time. Everyday, I got up at 5:30, laced up my boots, kissed my husband and kids and went off. Every day, I told myself, ‘I like this trade. I like this trade.’ Going forward from today, I’ve been selected to join the Ironworkers.”

“There were days I didn’t think I’d make it to this graduation,” Archie confided to the roomful of graduates’ friends and family members, trades and contractor representatives, and other well-wishers. “All my trials and tribulations have paid off and I’m proud to be a union Ironworker.”

“Life growing up was pretty tough,” graduate Jeff Boshey of Boise Forte told the room. “I’ve got to make a contribution to my family.” He said joining the apprentice readiness training program was “one of the best decisions I’ve made.”

“Success starts right here,” Boshey said. “I believe every one of us will be successful in what we decide to do.”

“We did it guys,” exclaimed graduate Lynette Villebrun, also from Boise Forte. “I’m proud of every one of you guys. You guys stayed focused when things got tough.”

The graduation program also featured remarks from speakers representing the trades, contractors, and State of Minnesota.

“They set up a great program for you. They made it tough,” said Larry Gilbertson, training director for

Ironworkers Local 512. “Everybody said you were one of the most fantastic groups we’ve had come through,” he added. “Look for that dream and live that dream,” Gilbertson encouraged the graduates: “Get yourself into that good-paying job with benefits. You folks all have the mettle and the wherewithal to do it.”

“Enbridge is proud to support this program as well as the students,” said Brent Horton, director of US projects for Enbridge.

“It’s a fantastic program. It’s a fantastic opportunity,” said Rick Martagon, state apprenticeship coordinator for the State of Minnesota. He told graduates: “the friendships and the people you’ve worked with and the people you learn from become part of your family. Work safe, work hard, make the most of every opportunity.”

“It’s emotional,” said graduate Aaron Lightfeather. “Thank you for giving us an opportunity to reach for the stars.”

“This was the pilot project,” said Five Skies’ Nyree Kedrowski. “We’re hoping this is an annual event.”

“Through this pilot, we have identified some tweaks we’d like to make next time around,” the Minneapolis Building Trades’ Jenny Winkelaar said. “But we’d like to pursue another cohort next year.”

“If this is going on next year, I’ve told my younger brother he should do this, too,” graduate Isaiah RedDay said.

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