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YOUTH BUILD

Amanda Fortin is ready to nail it as she enters ReCycle North's job skills training program.
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YouthBuild: Bridging the Gaps for Low-Income Women

Amanda Fortin is standing on a ladder, affixing a drip edge to a garden shed. She takes a few swings with her hammer. "This nail is not going in," she reports to her instructor, Adam Miller. "Try over here," he suggests. Fortin aims and swings again - and the nail goes right in. She smiles.

Fortin, 24, is one of 12 students currently involved in the YouthBuild program at ReCycle North, a job training, education and leadership development program for low-income young adults ages 16 to 24. She recently enrolled in the program after spotting a recruiting flier which read, in part, "Women are encouraged to apply."

Had those words not caught her eye, Fortin probably wouldn't have considered the program, which provides comprehensive job training experience in the construction industry, along with educational and leadership development opportunities. Intrigued, she called YouthBuild Program Director Andrew Jope for more information. After their conversation, she felt confident the program was a perfect fit. It would allow her to earn her GED and further her education, meet new people in Burlington - she's from New Hampshire - and gain confidence in her ability to fix things herself. "Now if something breaks, I can fix it," she says with a smile.

The YouthBuild concept began in 1978 in New York City, the brainchild of Dorothy Stoneman, a Harlem-based community activist, who envisioned the program as a way to teach skills to underprivileged youth while also revitalizing impoverished neighborhoods.

YouthBuild has existed in Burlington for 15 years and has been run by ReCycle North since 2004. "The YouthBuild model is really on to something," Jope says. He believes it does an excellent job of providing important opportunities and resources to those underserved by the public education system. "No one falls through the cracks here," he avers.

YouthBuild offers a wide range of services, from job and skills training to educational advancement opportunities to community service, under one roof - or rather, under many roofs. Academic classes take place above the ReCycle North household goods store on Pine Street, where experienced educators from ReCycle North's other training programs and Vermont Adult Learning help students master new problem-solving techniques, improve communication skills, and earn credit toward a high school diploma or prepare for the GED. Across the street, students learn construction skills in what is affectionately

called "the cave," next door to the non-profit's Building Materials Center. While ReCycle North is the home base for the program, much of the learning takes place outside its doors in the greater Burlington community.

"One thing I really like about the program is that not only are the students going through personal growth but they are really providing a service to the community," says Joep, who has been directing the program for more than two years. The eight-month YouthBuild program places a heavy emphasis on community service.

Amy Francoeur, community partnership coordinator of ReCycle North YouthBuild, explains that the students are given the freedom to choose a community group or institution they wish to work closely with for a five-month period. This allows them to fully commit to the experience and engage in a close relationship with the organization. Students pursue academic work and construction training four days a week, and community service on Fridays - with organizations as diverse as the Intervale's Healthy City farm, the ECHO Lake Aquarium and Science Center, and Burlington Parks and Recreation.

"By choosing what they're doing and getting to see the people they're helping fairly often, they're going to gain great work skills and make more of a connection to the community," Francoeur explains. Additionally, students regularly work at other community organizations such as the Burlington Food Bank, Imani Health Institute, Vermont Cares, Outright Vermont, and Bike Recycle Vermont. "We have a pretty wide range of places for students to get involved," Francoeur adds.

ReCycle North YouthBuild also provides the opportunity for community building outside of Vermont through affiliations with Habitat for Humanity and the national YouthBuild program. Last month, seven students and three administrators from the Vermont program traveled to Mississippi to assist with ongoing post-Hurricane Katrina construction efforts.

Another important aspect of ReCycle North YouthBuild is the mentor program, which Francoeur also coordinates. After the fifth week of the program, each student is matched with a



Amanda Fortin nails a drip edge onto a shed at the YouthBuild workshop of ReCycle North.
Photo: Melissa Meece

local community mentor, with whom they share the lunch hour once a week. According to Francoeur, the mentors provide students with stable support in the community, which may ultimately help the student find a job or continue her or his education. Having just begun the program, Fortin has not yet been matched with her mentor, but is looking forward to that phase of the program: "I always want to share something every day about how [well] I'm doing," she says.

As the only female student currently in the program, Fortin will have a female mentor. Francoeur says she's had no problem finding community members of both genders who want to serve as mentors. However, despite the fact that a woman started the national program, ReCycle North YouthBuild students and instructors tend to be male. The program has sought to enroll women, says Joep: not only through fliers encouraging women to apply but by advertising at agencies that serve young women. Staff also strive to educate the young men in the program to ensure that the women who join will feel comfortable.

"One barrier is that a lot of young women still don't see themselves in this field," says Joep. Adam Miller, YouthBuild's construction trainer, explains that "the industry that we train for is a male-dominated field. It takes a certain kind of woman to want to enter that field."



photo courtesy ReCycle North Youth Build
 Members of a 2007 YouthBuild class erect the sign kiosk they built for Burlington's H.O. Wheeler School – an example of the community service projects that characterize the YouthBuild mission.



photos Melissa Meece
 (above) Construction Trainer Adam Miller (left) and Amanda Fortin. (top) Tom Grocki (right) explains equipment to a new group of YouthBuild students.

Women who do join, like Fortin, tend to be serious about taking full advantage of the opportunities it affords, says Miller. And with a program like ReCycle North YouthBuild, the opportunities are wide ranging, empowering, and positive for the community as a whole.

For more information about the ReCycle North YouthBuild program, call 658-4143 ext.39 or visit www.recyclenorth.org.

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