

Woodbury Bulletin

'100 Hard Hats' build futures

By Tracey Laqua

"Never take the cross-braces off first. You'll notice that the shed was swaying back and forth after you did that," Lester Royal said to his construction class at Summit Academy Opportunities Industrialization Center.

The class, which is part of the job training school's "100 Hard Hats" program, was tearing down a shed. The class will rebuild the shed during the 20-week course to give hands-on understanding of the basics of construction.

Most of the students in the class are unemployed black men from North Minneapolis, the target demographic of Summit Academy's program and State Rep. Karen Klinzing's bill in the Minnesota State Legislature this session.

The bill, if passed, would give \$350,000 to the 100 Hard Hats program to help more students pay for the course.

Once Royal's class is finished this summer, the students will be placed in construction jobs in the Twin Cities.

This fits the mission of the school and Louis King II, president of the academy, who said, "The best social service program in the world is a living wage job."

The tuition for the 20-week course is \$3,475, compared to \$31,390 to incarcerate an adult for one year. It costs \$42,262 to support an adult with two children on public assistance per year, according to the Summit Academy Web site.

"Everybody wins," said King of his program.

A Dynamic Leader

King, a Woodbury resident since 2001, is originally from Florida, but came to Minneapolis in 1989 to teach Army ROTC. He said he was amazed by what he saw.



Lester Royal, gesturing with his arm, addresses members of a Summit Academy Opportunities Industrialization Center construction class as they rebuild a shed at a work site in Minneapolis. Royal, a licensed journeyman from Los Angeles, is one of the instructors at the facility.

"In the military, if you can imagine this, there is 100 percent employment. All the guys have work, all the guys have housing, all the guys have medical benefits, and all the guys get 30 days a year vacation. That's just life."

In Minneapolis he saw "a whole different world" where so many of its residents were unemployed. "I was amazed to find the young boys with their hats turned sideways, their pants pulled down, big clothes, terrorizing the women and children of the community," King said.

He volunteered in the area and then jumped at the opportunity to lead a merger of two programs to form Summit Academy OIC in 1996. He has been the president ever since. He also served one term on the Minneapolis school board.

A self-described competitive guy, King enjoyed the challenge of reviving the black community, which so many others have attempted over the years.

"Sometimes it just takes the right leader," Klinzing said.

Since moving to Woodbury in 2001, he has set out to prove himself on another front. "So many people think that people from the suburbs don't care about the inner city. I'm here to say that's not true," King said. It is also one of the reasons that King turned to Klinzing for help funding the academy.

Bipartisan Support

King, a democrat, said that his alliance with Republican Klinzing surprised some people.

"When you strip race aside, when you strip gender out, when you strip political affiliations out, we share the same vision for this state: good education for kids and employment for adults," King said.

The two met when they found out that their daughters attend the same dance class in Woodbury and have already worked together to get one grant for the last year.

The Academy's Quantum Opportunities Program got \$200,000 from the state last year. The program has a full-time staff at North High School to help enrolled students raise their GPA and become competitive for college.

This past success makes this session's 100 Hard Hats bill seem very likely to pass, according to Klinzing.

In King's terms, he said, "you can't debate jobs."

The bill has been attached to the omnibus K-12 education-funding bill that is currently in committee.

