

Positive directions

YouthBuild provides diplomas, life skills for young adults

By Katie Pohlman
Staff writer

Vanessa Mingo has always had a soft spot for animals. As a child, she would often bring injured ones home to help them, much to her mother's dismay.

The 23-year-old mother of two has dreamed of becoming a veterinarian for as long as she can remember. Personal setbacks and pregnancy obstructed the path to her dream career before, but this time she's determined to earn her high school diploma and attend college.

Mingo is one of 12 students in the Marion County Phoenix Rising YouthBuild program this spring. She said she signed up because she was looking for more in life.

Phoenix Rising YouthBuild, run by CareerSource Citrus Levy Marion, provides young adults ages 18 to 24 the opportunity to earn their high school diploma, receive workforce skill certificates, and develop leadership and communication skills. Students split their time between classroom work sessions and building a house for Habitat for Humanity of Marion County. Since the first project in 2011, 148 students have participated in the program and built 15 homes.

See YOUTH, A9



Kurt Bunnell II, left, and Lateria Cohen work on an application during a classroom session at the Hampton Campus of the College of Central Florida in Ocala on March 5 as part of their Phoenix Rising YouthBuild program. Along with school and volunteer work, the students also will help build a home for a family through Habitat for Humanity of Marion County. [ALAN YOUNGBLOOD/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER]



Kurt Bunnell II listens to a lesson during a classroom session. [STAFF PHOTOS BY ALAN YOUNGBLOOD]

YOUTH

From Page A1

Ninety-two percent of students in the program's history earned their diploma and 80 percent were either employed or enrolled in post-secondary education programs by the time they finished the program.

The current batch of students has been in the classroom since late January and will begin construction on the house Monday. A graduation ceremony will be held in early June.

The team atmosphere of the program helps students achieve success.

"Everyone is trying to help everybody out," Mingo said. "They're not trying to leave anyone else behind."

CareerSource Career Coach Heaven Colon, one of the program's two main classroom teachers, said she has pushed a team mentality since day one. If one person fails, all fail, she tells the students.

YouthBuild is funding through U.S. Department of Labor YouthBuild grants. CareerSource Citrus Levy Marion received its second grant, totaling about \$800,000, last summer. The grant is designed to fund 48 participants and construction of four homes through 2019. Students earn a weekly stipend of \$240, but the money isn't the motivation behind their interest in the program, said Kurt Bunnell, 22, of Citrus.

"We're not doing it for the money," said the father of one. "We want the certifications, diploma and achievements. The money helps us do this. It makes it actually possible."

Bunnell dropped out of high school so he could get a job to pay off his court costs after he got arrested as a teenager. He heard about YouthBuild while at the Marion County Jail and said he wanted to do it.

"It gave me something to help move in the positive direction when I got out," he said.

Bunnell already has some experience in the construction industry, so he helps teach the others and provides real-life examples for the class. He wants to continue in the construction industry after graduation and said the certifications will make him a more valuable employee to potential employers.

Students — who didn't know each other at the beginning of the program — now provide rides for each other and answer each other's questions. "The journey has been amazing," Colon said.



Gavon Eaves, a participant in the current Phoenix Rising YouthBuild program, works during a classroom session. [ALAN YOUNGBLOOD/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER]

If you go

What: Phoenix Rising YouthBuild wall-raising for a Habitat for Humanity of Marion County home

When: 9 a.m. March 16, 8075 Juniper Road, Silver Springs Shores.

Who: Anyone interested in the program, whether as a future student, program partner or well-wisher, is invited to attend.

Contact: 291-9550, ext. 2293.

While Mingo and Bunnell are still completing work for their diploma, other students have already finished. Those students move onto book work that teaches them about life skills, how to budget, substance abuse and more.

"It lets you know everything you'll go through in life," said Lateria Cohen, 19, of Ocala. "It helps you get your lifestyle choices all planned."

After learning about credit cards and debt, Cohen said she is happy she did not follow through with her impulse to open a credit card as soon as she turned 18 and max it out.

"I could mess up easily if I didn't join this program," she said.

Cohen, who wants to be a prison warden, said the main reason she joined the program was for the diploma. The certificates are amazing to have, she said, but they won't help her as much as a diploma will.

Gavon Eaves, 19, of Ocala, agrees.

"Once you have knowledge and education, it opens up a lot of opportunities," he said.

Like for many participants, YouthBuild provides another chance for Eaves to earn his diploma. He said he tried other GED and diploma programs, but they did not work out.

Eaves does not know what he will do after graduation, but he has already agreed to help his uncle build a house with the skills he has gained.

Brandon Shippee, 18, of Dunnellon, wants to do something with cars after he graduates. His dream is to be a racecar driver, but he said he will also settle for a job as a mechanic.

He said YouthBuild is a "thousand" times better than other GED programs because you not only get your diploma, you learn useful skills.

"You're not just learning school work," Shippee said. "You're learning useful stuff like how to work."

Phoenix Rising was spearheaded in 2010 by then Ocala Police Chief Sam Williams and the Ocala Police Department. In addition to CareerSource Citrus Levy Marion and its youth services provider, Eckerd Connects Workforce Development, the current partners include Habitat for Humanity of Marion County, the city of Ocala, Marion County Sheriff's Office, Marion County Board of County Commissioners, Neighborhood Housing and Development Corporation, Florida State Housing Initiative Partnership (SHIP), Equal Housing Opportunity, Silver River Mentoring & Instruction and the College of Central Florida.

Phoenix Rising YouthBuild has become a national model of public/private partnership and has earned recognition from the Florida League of Cities, National League of Cities and Harvard's School of Business. The program last spring received Habitat for Humanity International's highest honor, the Clarence E. Jordan Award for creativity and innovation in building homes and communities.

To learn more, call 291-9550, ext. 2293.

Contact Katie Pohlman at 867-4065, katie.pohlman@starbanner.com or [@katie.pohlman](https://www.facebook.com/katie.pohlman).