



PHOENIX RISING CELEBRATES 10TH YOUTHBUILD IN MARION COUNTY

The bright morning sun had nothing on Melissa Santiago. The soon-to-be homeowner was positively beaming as she and her husband José Pina waited for the walls to go up on the home they hope to call their own in time for the holidays.

"This is going to be our house. No one's going to come and take it away from us, and we'll know our family is safe," Melissa, 24, told me recently.

The couple, originally from Puerto Rico, moved to Marion County two years ago. They both work at Walmart and currently live in Marion Oaks with their 1-year-old son, Christian.

Their home is being constructed as a centerpiece of the 10th Phoenix Rising YouthBuild project in Marion County. It sits on a slight rise in a hilly neighborhood in Silver Springs Shores, across from a swathe of green space and framed by the shade of large oaks. The couple watches as their 15-member construction crew, sporting pink t-shirts and hard hats, gathers a dozen or so paces away.

Phoenix Rising YouthBuild is an alternative education program that kicked off in Ocala in 2011, spearheaded by then Ocala Police Chief

Sam Williams. And yes, I've written about it before, but each project, each class of young adults is unique and special and is the kind of community success story for which we can all be proud. Sometimes it's nice to be reminded of the good.

At its heart, the program helps revitalize economically-challenged neighborhoods while making a positive difference in the lives of 18 to 24-year olds in need of earning their high school diplomas and who are willing to work, and work hard, in order to gain employment and/or enroll in a post-secondary education or training program.

"We feel very good about it," said José, 27, when asked what he thought of the program. "The youth are learning so much and what they are doing for us, they are doing from their heart."

The most visible component of the program is construction of homes for deserving families in partnership with Habitat for Humanity of Marion County.

CareerSource Citrus Levy Marion and its youth services provider, Eckerd Connects Workforce Development, recruit the young

adults, conduct "mental toughness" training, provide classroom instruction, work with students at the construction site, and offer "success" counseling and follow up.

Major funding for the program comes from a grant obtained by CareerSource CLM from the U.S. Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration. Current year federal funding for Youth Build is \$466,821.

Additional partners include the City of Ocala, Marion County Board of County Commissioners, College of Central Florida (Hampton Center), Marion County Sheriff's Office, Neighborhood Housing and Development Corporation, Florida State Housing Initiative Partnership (SHIP) and Equal Housing Opportunity, and Silver River Mentoring & Instruction (SRMI).

Kimberly Grey, Eckerd program manager, said "Phoenix Rising YouthBuild is an extraordinary, uplifting program which has become a national model of what communities can build when public and private partners work together."

The program has earned recognition from the

Florida League of Cities, National League of Cities and Harvard's School of Business. It has also received the Clarence E. Jordan Award which is Habitat for Humanity International's highest honor for creativity and innovation in building homes and communities.

Grey pointed out that it is often assumed graduates end up in construction because they build a home.

"That's certainly great if they do, but YouthBuild is about learning how to work as a team, it's about

discipline and giving back to the community. It also builds character and confidence."

Winter Hovis, 19, of Dunnellon, said she was searching for a program that could help her turn things around after making some mistakes in her life.

Asked what she's learned so far in the program, Winter quickly replied, "teamwork and leadership."

"Also, I've never built a home before, so that's a little surprising," she laughed. Once she earns

her high school diploma, Winter said she hopes to go to college and become a registered nurse.

Excited about her future thanks to Phoenix Rising, Winter recommended the program to sister Milena Hovis, 18.

"It's pretty awesome," said Milena, who wants to finish high school and become a veterinarian to ensure a bright future for her 2-year-old daughter Raelyn. "It gives people a real second chance to make something of themselves."

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