



STUDENTS HAMMER HOME PHOENIX RISING YOUTHBUILD DESPITE 'OBSTACLE' OF COVID-19

Call it the house that Covid built – or more precisely, almost didn't. Young adults poised to begin the 11th Marion County Phoenix Rising YouthBuild back in March were told that the project had to be shut down due to the coronavirus. Instead of wielding hammers they had to exercise patience. Throughout the spring and summer, Phoenix Rising partners kept in touch, providing encouragement and assurances that the project was still going to happen. The socially distanced commencement ceremony that took place two days before Thanksgiving was proof of that. Donning caps, gowns and face masks, the following graduates walked across the stage at the Klein Conference Center, accepting their diplomas with fist-bumps instead of handshakes: Justin



Ammon, Christopher Burchill, Dalon Charles, Tralayah Fluker, Noeliz Santiago Morales, David Rohena, Neftali Torres and Darrell Wilkerson, Jr.

The ceremony capped off the 24-week community based, alternative education program that helps revitalize economically challenged neighborhoods while making a positive difference in the lives of 16-to-24 year-olds willing to work and give back to the community.

A key feature of the program, which got its start in Ocala in 2011, involves construction of homes for deserving families in partnership with Habitat for Humanity of Marion County.

To date, 222 students have taken part in Phoenix Rising programs in Marion County resulting in completion of nearly a thousand certifications and 34 homes – the most recent is a three-bedroom, two-bath, 1,100-square foot home in Silver Springs Shores.

Through Phoenix Rising, students split their time between the construction site and the classroom, where they earn their high school diploma and prepare for postsecondary training opportunities, including college, apprenticeships, and employment.

CareerSource CLM's youth services provider, Eckerd Connects Workforce Development, offers significant program support such as mentoring, follow-up education, employment, and personal counseling services as well as participation in community service and civic engagement. Career coaches and success mentors also work alongside students at the construction site.

Heaven Colon, Eckerd program manager, congratulated the graduates saying their journey "is to be celebrated."

"This amazing group had many obstacles to overcome ... not only their life challenges but had to endure Covid, had to overcome

the barrier or hearing, 'oh no, we're going to be shut down' the day they were going to be selected," she said.

Paul Scrambling, Habitat construction supervisor who has worked on all the YouthBuild projects in Marion County, told the graduates that the program is a "stepping stone for you to go onto something better ... the sky's the limit."

Scrambling noted that one such graduate was Jackelyn Torres, who took part in the second Phoenix Rising YouthBuild in 2012. Torres said of her experience, "I couldn't have done without it."

Torres now works as a Phoenix Rising success mentor for CareerSource CLM and Eckerd Connects.

"Being able to come back and guide youth along their success meant everything to me," she said. "I was very proud watching them walk across the stage and in being able to send them off to continue their success in life. I

know they will go far."

In addition to CareerSource CLM, Eckerd Connects and Habitat, Phoenix Rising YouthBuild partners include the City of Ocala, College of Central Florida, Marion County Board of County Commissioners, Marion County Sheriff's Office, and Silver River Mentoring & Instruction.

The Phoenix Rising YouthBuild project is supported by the Employment and Training Administration of the U.S. Department Labor as part of an award totaling \$740,737 with no part financed by nonfederal sources.

The program, which has expanded into Citrus County, is a national model of what communities can build when working together. It has earned recognition from the Florida League of Cities, National League of Cities, Harvard's School of Business, and has received Habitat for Humanity International's highest honor, the Clarence E. Jordan Award for creativity and innovation in building homes and communities.





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