

Phoenix Rising Project Complete

By Melinda Carstensen, Correspondent

At the start of the year, 19-year-old Raven Myhand was jobless and searching for work. One day, in the midst of her job hunt, Myhand heard about a community project that would allow young job seekers like her to build a home from the ground up and get professional training in the process.

It's because of that program — the Phoenix Rising Project — that Myhand has decided to return to school and get her GED.

Myhand is one of 11 students who graduated from Phoenix Rising, which built a new house at 1560 NW 14th St. for local couple and Habitat for Humanity volunteers Kerry and Sabrina Cook.

The project started in early February. The Ocala Police Department spearheaded the effort, collaborating with donors such as DeLuca Toyota owner Frank DeLuca and the city of Ocala, along with Workforce Connection and project managing firm Henkels & McCoy.

On June 2, organizers presented the Cooks with a key to their new home and honored the 11 graduates, all of whom received at least one specialized job certification. Those certifications included National Retail Foundation (NFR) customer service training, Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and CPR.

Ocala Police Chief Samuel Williams, who proposed the project, said Phoenix Rising was such a success that the city plans a repeat. The next project might even launch by year's end, said Ilianette Echevarria, program manager for youth service at Workforce Connection.

OPD grant manager Laurie Whitaker said the next project already has been partially funded and that organizers just need another donor to step forward. For the first project, that primary donor was DeLuca, who donated \$30,000.

Ron Goss, senior regional manager for Henkels & McCoy, which has collaborated with Workforce Connection for six years to help young people find work, said the main challenge wasn't construction-related. Rather, he said, getting them to work as a team and to remain positive was toughest.

Echevarria, who worked directly with the participants, agreed.

"Keeping away from getting mixed up into drugs or keeping away from the negatives in their environment — learning these things in class and for them to actually employ those skills into society — it's a big challenge," she said.

Some of the participants couldn't overcome that challenge. The program started with 16 people, ages 18 to 21, but organizers dismissed five for various reasons.



Phoenix Rising students Jean Santiago (left) and Yachtez Jackson learn basic framing under the watchful eye of Dave Scrambling (center), Marion County Habitat for Humanity's Instructor

Of the 11 who graduated, four have since gotten jobs and two, including Myhand, have enrolled at Marion County Community Technical and Adult Education.

Myhand said it was easy to get frustrated on the construction site because many of the participants, including her, hadn't ever built a house. In the end, however, she said completing the project was rewarding.

"I could not believe that we finished this house," Myhand said, "because when we started it was just a block of cement. It was an amazing feeling to help the Cook family."

Goss, of Henkels & McCoy, said the main goal was to prepare the youths for the workplace.

"It's really about increasing self esteem so they don't go down the wrong road," Goss said. "They can say, 'You see that house there? I helped build that,' so they can have a little bit of pride in what they did."



Habitat "Golden Hammer" (retired) LD Brent, shows students Ryan Glazer and Jonathan Morel how to interpret building prints as they build a home for the Cook family.

*Doug Engle/
Staff photographer*