



Mondovi Herald-News

Edition 31

Thursday, August 1, 2013

\$1.00

Program offers at-risk youth a 'fresh start' through home building project

Open house debuts newly-completed home in Mondovi subdivision

by Beth Kraft

After nearly a year of working to overcome various challenges, both personal and construction-related, the 16 youth who helped build a new home in Mondovi from the ground up took a step back and reflected on the many ways their experiences with the Fresh Start program have changed their lives.

The program, offered through Western Dairyland, provides guidance and education for at-risk youth ages 16-24 and works with them to construct a home from the ground up.

A large group of the young men involved in building the new, three-bedroom home at 237 Peeso Creek Lane and representatives of Western Dairyland held an open house July 18 to introduce the home to the public.

Though the program's youth come from various backgrounds, they all seemed proud of their accomplishments and the path Fresh Start has put them on moving forward as they led visitors on tours through the new home.

"I've learned a lot from it," said Greg Perry, one of the project crew's most seasoned members. "They taught me how to keep a job and I learned a lot of skills."

Site supervisor Luke Steffen says the program's youth arrive with virtually no construction experience, but leave with a greater sense of confidence when working with tools.

"The biggest thing is hopefully we built a little work ethic," said Steffen. "They may not all be construction workers, but hopefully they now know how to keep a house up and fix some things themselves in the future when they own a house."

Fresh Start offers a wide range of troubled youths, from those who have struggled in the foster system, lived in halfway homes, or simply found them-



The home at 237 Peeso Creek Lane on Mondovi's north side was completed in late June and will be sold to an income-eligible family.

selves caught up with the wrong group of friends, a chance to change their lives for the better.

"I was hanging out with the wrong crowd of people," says Logan Everson, one youth who found himself in a downward spiral for drug use and burglary incidents.

Everson joined the program last December after hearing about it at the McKinley charter school in Eau Claire. At the job site, he helped put up drywall, insulation and assisted with laying the home's hardwood floors.

"Ever since [I joined Fresh Start] I've been doing a lot better," said Everson, noting he's stopped associating with his former crowd.

Everson has also completed certification courses in CPR and First Aid and is planning to enroll in the welding program at Chippewa Valley Technical College this fall to continue to add to the skills he's learned through Fresh Start.

"It's just helped me become a better person," he added.

Perry echoed Everson's thoughts on the turnaround the construction project's lessons have made in his life.

A participant since last September, Perry found Fresh Start at the suggestion of his probation officer after he was involved in an alcohol-related incident.

The veteran crewmember had a hand in a wide range of home building projects, including stud

framing, drywalling, siding and roofing. He recently completed an advanced welding program through Western Dairyland and was in the process of applying for a welding job working for PDM Bridge in Eau Claire.

"I think I've become a better person and I've been staying out of trouble," Perry said proudly. "[This program] has been a good first step toward a better future."

Program works to rebuild lives

Western Dairyland launched Fresh Start in 1998 and has now built nearly 30 new homes in addition to rehabilitating a few other structures and transitional units, according to program manager Katie Hulbert.

The program's educational and hands-on components focus on assisting youths "who are at-risk and need help with employability skills, with schooling, career direction, and independent living skills," Hulbert explained. "Really we work to meet the needs of the youth coming into the program."

The classroom component helps Fresh Start participants work toward receiving their high school diplomas or HSED. Six of this year's youths are newly-minted high school graduates, Hulbert happily announced at the open house ceremony.

Since its inception Fresh Start has helped over 400 youths with
See **Building project/pg. 3**



Fresh Start program participants recently hosted an open house to showcase the results of this year's construction project and share the many ways the project has helped rebuild their lives. Sixteen youth were involved in the Mondovi home building project over the past year, including, pictured, left to right, Chaz Brantner, Brett Seidler, Greg Perry, Connor Vance, Kenny Vang, Brandon Mondeau, Cole Knutson, Logan Everson, Andrew Denman and Western Dairyland intern Nick Asay.

Building project

cont'd. from front

troubled backgrounds in the Eau Claire and Black River Falls areas turn over a new leaf, but the program isn't for everyone.

Hulbert stressed the importance of all program youths reaching the finish line in order for Fresh Start to continue on.

"If they don't finish their 900 hours through the AmeriCorps program, that puts us at risk to lose our funding for the following year," Hulbert explained, noting the program costs about \$400,000 to operate per year and receives key financial contributions from several state and local agencies in addition to AmeriCorps.

Those funds provide each youth worker an hourly wage of \$7.25 and awards them \$700 towards their post-secondary education once they complete the program.

With Fresh Start's future in the hands of each youth they accept, Hulbert said an intensive interview process and orientation is necessary to ensure all expectations are understood.

"We need to make sure that they're really serious about the program," she said. "We totally get that there are going to be bumps along the way because we're trying to change old behaviors into new behaviors. We just want to make sure that even though they're going to have those bumps in the road, they're going to be committed to the program and work through those issues."

Giving Fresh Start youths a fresh slate each day also helps them make strides toward major lifestyle changes.

"We don't keep giving them chances over and over, but we really work hard [to help them out]," Hulbert said.

"They get their fair shares of chances, there's no doubt about that," Steffen nodded in agreement. "The biggest thing is looking to see that they're willing to

make a change in their lives—to start walking a little finer line."

Building this year's Fresh Start home in Mondovi is a first for the county.

"It's inside our realm of counties that we can work with and we've never done anything in Buffalo County, so I thought it was a good idea," said Steffen, noting the property was also made quite affordable thanks to the subdivision's developer, Darrin Ede.

In fact, Fresh Start's 2013-14 home-building project is slated to return to the very same neighborhood.

Steffen said the organization is in the process of closing on a new property just down the street from the newly-completed home, setting Fresh Start up to help a whole new group of young adults pave a path to a better life and learn some handy skills on the side.

Hulbert said the finished home will be sold to an income-eligible family in the community and expects it to go on the market soon.

Qualifying families must be at 80 percent county-median income and be able to get a first mortgage. Hulbert says the program can assist with obtaining additional mortgages for the homeowner if they are unable to receive a home mortgage for the asking price.

Fresh Start also currently has a home for sale in Black River Falls and a rehabbed home on the market in Augusta.

Hulbert said Fresh Start's youth forces were formerly split evenly between the Eau Claire and Black River Falls areas to allow for two home projects per year, but that second program was forced to fold.

Now all of the youths learn at one job site under Steffen's direction, but teaching up to 20 young men each year how to build a

house definitely has its challenges.

"Safety is always a big concern," said Steffen. "Getting them to learn how to use the tools and be comfortable with the tools...believe it or not, measuring can be a hurdle."

Fresh Start member Kenny Vang says he's now much more skilled with a tape measure after he helped put up siding and build the deck at the home.

"It's been a good learning opportunity," he said.

Like many others in the program, Vang also found himself associating with the wrong people and got caught up in a fist-fight one day. He heard about Fresh Start through a work release program in May and recognized it as an opportunity to start over and gain a new direction in life.

Vang says he isn't yet sure what career path he will follow, but noted Fresh Start's hands-on training and guidance have given him confidence moving forward and he hopes to go on to college.

Fresh Start members were generally involved with the basic components of the home, including drywall, shingles, siding, and flooring. Specialized components, such as the plumbing and electrical work, were subcontracted to professionals, said Steffen, citing home building regulations.

Teaching the youths how each project needed to look had its hurdles, but Steffen is pleased with their progress.

"This year was overall pretty good," he said. "There's always going to be bumps in the road but for the most part I'm pretty proud of the guys and I hope that they are transitioning into 'real' jobs or schooling, which a lot of them are."

For more information about Western Dairyland's Fresh Start program, please visit http://www.westerndairyland.org/fresh_start.phtml.