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Jose

Encarnacion doing weatherization at the Osborne Association's Green Career Center

From mean streets to green jobs

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Training helps ex-offenders find work in clean industries

Four years-ago, Mott Haven resident Pablo Negrón, 24, was jailed for assault. When he was released, he settled for one of the few jobs that would employ someone with a criminal record, a minimum wage job as a maintenance worker.

He wanted to change his life, he said, but he felt trapped, “like I was in a dead end and would never come out.”

Last month, he stumbled on the Green Career Center, the newest workforce development program of the Osborne Association. “I just heard ‘career,’” said Negrón, explaining what led him to become a trainee.

Now he is part of the second class at the Green Career Center, learning marketable skills essential to moving up the green job ladder—how to build with sustainable, non-toxic materials, conduct home energy audits and install and maintain energy-efficient heating and cooling, for example.

The center's first graduates have already secured interviews from businesses that focus on environmentally-friendly products and services, including Tri-State Biodiesel, which recycles cooking oil to fuel diesel engines at its plant on Barretto Street in Hunts Point.

Located on Westchester Avenue and East 158th Street, the Green Career Center was funded by \$2 million of federal stimulus money awarded to the Osborne Association by the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services last September. The center represents a “shift in philosophy,” explained Justin Petropoulos, communications associate at the Osborne Association, which has been helping ex-offenders find jobs for almost 80 years.

The organization wants to assure “not just a job, but that there's career path,” he said, and that participants “can move up.”

To be eligible, participants must have a high school diploma or GED, test at ninth grade literacy and math levels and be willing to perform physical labor. They learn construction skills—from using green building materials to weatherization—from the Laborers International Union of North America, LIUNA, Local 10. All graduates are also offered an opportunity to join the union.

Negron sees the union component as crucial. “It's security,” he said. “It lets you know you are getting a certain salary.”

Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr. arrived at the Osborne Associates offices on March 12 to officially launch the Green Career Center. “Osborne has been a leading institution in giving individuals a second chance in life,” said Diaz. “I'm a believer in that.”

Current trainees like Negron gathered at the ribbon-cutting for an opportunity to network with employers who are or will be partnering with the Green Career Center. Hunts Point-based DEC Green Corp., which manufactures [solar powered trash compacting receptacles](#), has already been employing Osborne participants for almost 10 years. “Whenever I need more labor my first inclination is to turn to Osborne,” said Frank Cruz, CEO of DEC.

Newer green businesses like [ReBuilders Source](#), the Mott Haven warehouse that rescues and resells surplus and used building materials and appliances, was also represented. As a worker-owned cooperative, ReBuilders would offer employees an opportunity to eventually become owners of the company, said Joel Frank, one of three current work-owners. “We would love that,” he said.

That's in keeping with the vision of the [Consortium for Worker Education](#), an umbrella organization dispensing federal funds to both Greenworkers Cooperatives and the Osborne Association. “People need work to pay the bills,” said Rebecca Lurie, the consortium's director of development, “but they need advancement to improve.”

Once they complete their training, she hopes participants will look to community colleges to further their qualifications for green sector jobs. The Center for Sustainable Energy at Bronx Community College recently began offering an associates degree in energy services technology, providing advanced credentials for “green-collar” jobs.

Aisha Louis, the first female participant at the Green Career Center, is optimistic. Dressed to impress the potential employers at the ribbon-cutting, she was looking forward to the beginning of construction training the following week.

“It’s something new,” she said. “It’s going to be something big.”

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