



ROD WOODSON
(shown at a luncheon earlier this year)
Testified that B18-137 is the 'way to go.'

D.C. COUNCIL CONSIDERING BILLS TO HELP EX-OFFENDERS

By Arnesa A. Howell

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MAKING STRIDES: JOBS COALITION ACCOMPLISHMENTS



While raising awareness of workforce challenges and potential barriers to employment, the JOBS Coalition and its members have combined their resources and industry expertise to achieve the following results:

- > Built the Bellevue Resource Center, a program facility serving the hard-to-reach, hard-to-employ, and returning ex-offender populations. The Center was completed on September 30, 2003.
- > Guided the creation of the Construction & Design Academy at Cardozo, providing District students access, training, and preparation for careers in the construction industry and trades after graduation. The Academy officially opened in September 2005.
- > Leading the Children of Mine Center, in partnership with the Architecture Research Institute at the University of the District of Columbia, in designing, planning and developing a new community center in the Anacostia/Hillsdale community, and restoring the historic home of the city's first mayor. □



POISED FOR SUCCESS
The 2009 Graduating Class of the Academy of Construction & Design with ACAD staff

CLASS OF 2009

ACAD CELEBRATES 14 GRADUATES

The full spectrum of emotions—from congratulatory hugs to goodbye tears—filled the third annual Meet the Future Luncheon, which honored the 2009 graduating class of the Academy of Construction & Design (ACAD) at Cardozo Senior High School. *By Arnesa A. Howell*

“This class has students from six different countries—it’s very diverse,” acknowledged ACAD Manager Shelly Morrison, who helped provide constant emotional and academic support through the Academy for the 14 graduates. “These students are together despite their cultural differences.”

Despite the downturn in the economy, the parents, teachers, manager of the Academy, friends and family, and interested members of the construction industry came together on May 8 to support the program and honor the accomplishments of the latest graduates.

“Your continued support says to them and others that the learning that they’re getting and their education is important,” said Steve Donohoe, chair of the luncheon and president of Donohoe Construction Company. And, he added, through the strong work ethic the students learned during their time at the Academy, he “hopes some future leaders” emerge from the Academy of Construction & Design.

Making a Difference

While the Academy clearly motivates students about construction and vocational trades, it also sparks something more: the desire to excel.

“Just being in the Academy of Construction & Design and having talks with Ms. [Shelly] Morrison, Mr. [Marshall] Janifer and Ms. [Rita] Epps deepened my decision about wanting to attend college,” said graduate Freddy Possian in his award-winning essay, of the staff and instructors at the Academy. “The Academy of Construction & Design has taught me skills that will serve me for life and I am a better person because of it.”

Possian, whose essay garnered him a \$1,500 Norman Dreyfuss Award, will be the first person in his family to attend college. He will be attending Pennsylvania State University, where he will double major in international business and criminal justice.

Meanwhile, fellow graduate Marie Louise Ngo Mbock, in her essay, also credits the

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Returning citizens, flanked by family members and other supporters, crowded the steps of the John A. Wilson Building in downtown Washington, D.C. on July 1 in peaceful demonstration in support of two bills focusing on human rights, and successful reentry, for ex-offenders.

That diverse crowd of men and women of all ages and ethnic backgrounds would later pour into the main chamber of the Wilson Building's fifth floor for a joint public hearing on the bills—the Human Rights for Ex-Offenders Amendment Act of 2009 (B18-136) and the Successful Ex-Offender Re-Entry Act of 2009 (B18-137).

B18-136, introduced by D.C. Councilmember Marion Barry (Ward 8), chair of the Committee on Housing and Workforce Development, would amend the Human Rights Act of 1977 to prohibit employment, housing, and educational discrimination based on arrest or conviction record, with certain exceptions. Meanwhile, B18-137, also introduced by Barry with fellow Councilmember Michael Brown (At-Large), would require the mayor, within 90 days of the law's effective date, to submit to the council a "comprehensive plan outlining a strategy for successful reentry of ex-offenders back into the community in the areas of housing, education, health care, rehabilitation, job training, and employment opportunities."

"This is such a passionate issue," proclaimed Councilmember Yvette M. Alexander (Ward 7), chair of the Committee on Aging and Community Affairs, as she surveyed the full chamber after panel testimony on behalf of returning citizens drew applause. "I applaud the work each of you is doing in your community."

Her colleague Brown added, "Over the next two years, about 4,000 returning citizens are coming back to the community." He noted that more programs providing assistance to returning citizens need to be in place to reduce the risk of these individuals becoming repeat offenders.

The hearing on this issue also drew a witness list of 50, including testimony from Rod Woodson and Carol Randolph, both representing the D.C. Students Construction Trades Foundation.

Woodson, a partner with the District office of Holland & Knight LLP and co-chair of its D.C. Practice Group, weighed in on the measures, saying that the latter bill (B18-137) is "certainly the way to go now."

However, he testified, "With regard to the 'protected class' approach of B18-136, it is a negative way to search for a positive result, as this approach will encourage an influx of

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MARKS OF EXCELLENCE
Marie Louise Ngo Mbock (above, center) and Freddy Possian (below, far right) are honored with Norman Dreyfuss Awards.



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Academy and its staff with encouraging her to further her education. Mbock, originally from Cameroon in West Africa, wrote that she overcame the challenges of being a "French-speaking person in an English country" in the classroom. At the Academy, where she had started with the study of carpentry, she recalled: "Meeting with my teacher there for the first time was not an easy thing. I was not talking; I couldn't look at them, seemed lost and could not answer when I was asked a question. I was the laughing stock of the class because of my accent and my timidity."

But through the nurturing of those like Morrison, who is affectionately known as a "mother hen," Mbock blossomed.

"I believe the things learned at the Academy of Construction & Design have made me a better, stronger and wiser young woman and I would not have been able to learn them anywhere else," stated Mbock, who added she has gained "skills that I will carry for a lifetime." Her newfound confidence, she continued, will help her become a future social worker.

"I want to become a person who will always be there for those in need of help, for anyone who is hurt and needs to turn his or her life around," she wrote. Her heartfelt words earned her the top award: a \$2,500 Norman Dreyfuss scholarship.

Metaphorically Speaking

Keynote Speaker Courtland Malloy, a columnist at *The Washington Post*, had words of encouragement and wisdom for the ACAD grads, telling them to be disciplined in how they carry themselves and when faced with obstacles that may knock them down, don't allow themselves to get knocked out.

In speaking to the newly-minted graduates, Malloy reflected on the early 1980s when the Willard InterContinental Washington hotel, where the luncheon was held, was in a run-down state. He said, someone had a vision to "bring it back to life" to the picturesque hotel it is today.

"This place is kind of a metaphor for what the construction business does—bring things back to life and in the process of doing that, we recreate ourselves," added Malloy. In a sense, the same can be said of the Academy and the way it takes

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THE WASHINGTON
POST's Courtland Malloy

PROJECT EMPOWERMENT INITIATIVE SUCCESSFULLY SUPPORTS EX-OFFENDERS, ONE-STOP SYSTEM FACES CHALLENGES

On the heels of a meeting focused on an in-depth discussion of the standards being drafted to certify ex-offenders for employment, the JOBS Coalition Ex-Offender Task Force reconvened, this time with District government representatives from the Department of Employment Services (DOES) and the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council at the table as part of a fact-finding effort for the respective agencies. *By Arnesa A. Howell*

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young people “in the rough” and builds them into men and women by giving them the tools they need to be successful in their own rights. That would include the mathematical ability and literary skills they learn through these trades.

But beyond practical skills, there are other items these young people should always keep handy in their toolboxes. A sense of humor, stresses Malloy, is one of them.

“Never let anybody make you walk off the job,” he told the audience, where many nodded in agreement. Still, he added, the “best tool in the box has got to be faith.”

“Think of faith as the oil that takes the friction out of the way—makes you run smooth,” he said. “The oil of faith can turn a stumbling block into a stepping stone.”

Road to Recovery

Also in the spotlight was ACAD alumnus Angelo

Green, who shared his heart-tugging story of de-termination and perseverance after his brother was shot and killed, and later, Green himself suffered a gunshot wound to the head after being robbed.

“I had to fight for my life,” he recalled. “That recovery road continues to be a journey.”

Although unable to work during his recovery, he said that Morrison and Rita Epps, careers and college coach at ACAD, kept in “constant contact with my family” and offered continuous support, including for his decision to return to take apprenticeship classes in electrical work.

“I attended every class and didn’t miss one, and I even took the tests that were offered even though I did not get any credit,” he shared. “I wasn’t going to let a bullet stop me from making my dreams a reality.”

Green is now employed and taking apprenticeship classes at the D.C. Apprenticeship Academy at Cardozo, where he is receiving credit for his work this time around. □

Liz DeBarros, legislative affairs specialist for DOES, explained Project Empowerment—a program that serves a majority of ex-offenders, but is for District residents in high-crime areas—and the challenges of the One-Stop initiative.

Serving 600 city residents in 2009, Project Empowerment’s offer of support services (including mental and medical health assistance) is what helps make it successful, says DeBarros. “Many graduates get placed in private sector and government jobs,” she told the task force of the program, which aims in part to reduce recidivism by offering participants the support and resources they need to obtain—and hopefully retain—employment.

DeBarros adds that one of the biggest challenges with the population served is transitioning from subsidized to unsubsidized employment. Basically, “selling the program” and putting out there that “this is a program that works,” she says.

Unlike the better-known Project Empowerment, the One-Stop system offered throughout the city is “not doing as well” and is on the radar of DOES’ newest director, Joseph P. Walsh Jr. DeBarros says the agency would like for these One-Stop centers, which offer a variety of employment support services including filing for unemployment benefits depending on location, to offer the full suite of support services: mental health, counseling, and employability services.

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Managing Editor: Arnesa A. Howell

Executive Editor: Carol Randolph

Copy Editor: Pam Ellison

Contributors: Arnesa A. Howell

Graphic Design: Jenn French Designs, LLC

Photographer: Imagine Photography

Board of Directors: Robert Brauhohler, Bill Dean, Lynn C. French, Balchander Jayaraman, John McMahon, Rev. Anthony J. Motley, Debra Schoonmaker, J. Anthony Towns, Esq., Rev. Stephen Tucker, Terrell C. Waller, I. Margaret White, Hal Williams

JOBS Coalition Legal Adviser: Roderic Woodson

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legal proceedings for years to come. We will find ourselves consuming much-needed time as well as social, economic, and governmental resources, in the courts.” Woodson added that a “coordinated plan of action by all stakeholders, including ex-offenders,” is needed, as proposed by B18-137.

Meanwhile, Randolph, vice president of strategic communications for Miller & Long Concrete Construction, brought to the attention of the committees that she has, for almost seven months, been part of an ad hoc group of government agencies, community and faith-based organizations, and employers that evolved out of the JOBS Coalition’s latest forum in November 2008. That forum, she explained, focused on employment challenges faced by returning ex-offenders. And that group, she stated, has since adopted a set of accords designed to help these returning citizens, as well as training providers, faith-based organizations, and employers when it comes to hiring this population.

Through a series of meetings, the ad hoc group discovered common concerns and challenges when it comes to returning citizens, including: the need for longer training periods in life skills to help break bad habits and attitudes; the need for measurable and accountable standards for training providers to determine the quality of training the individuals received; and the need for more com-

munity involvement across areas such as housing, transportation, and mentoring. And there are numerous concerns expressed by employers as well, including over the offenses committed, she said.

“[M]y company, Miller & Long, has a long history of hiring ex-offenders. Our basic tenets require employees to show up on time and be willing to work,” Randolph stated. “After that, how far they go within the company depends on them.” Randolph admitted that the company’s results have been mixed, but added that “our actions continue to be part of being good corporate citizens who believe that helping the underserved and returning ex-offenders become productive citizens is not only good for business, it is also good for the community in which we do business.”

Summing up, Randolph urged (to help ensure the requirements within the accords have some teeth) that the following be addressed:

- Legislation that eliminates liability concerns on the part of employers.
- Case management services and oversight from referring training providers that can exist for up to a year.
- Post employment supports such as transportation, daycare and mentoring.
- Strong educational and training programs, especially in the area of life skills.
- Pre-release job programs that lay down a job history for potential employers. □

JOBS Task Force *Continued from page 3*

“It’s not necessarily happening [now],” she acknowledged, “but [we’re] moving in that direction.”

She noted that there are about 32,000 unemployed residents in this tumultuous economic time, but a “lot of stimulus money is coming into the department.” The goal, she adds, is to make a “robust” One-Stop system.

Working with Law Enforcement

Also in attendance for the May 28 meeting at Holland & Knight LLP was Nancy Ware, executive director of the District’s Criminal Justice Coordinating Council, charged to work with law enforcement and criminal justice entities citywide to improve the administration and implementation of public safety.

Ware noted that the independent agency has applied for funding as part of the Second Chance Act to address the needs of female ex-offenders. “[The agency] feels it’s important to ease the legislative barriers for ex-offenders trying to get jobs,” she says. “This population deserves opportunities.”

Ware added that it would be helpful if the JOBS Coalition would continue to work with the D.C. Chamber of Commerce to assist in educating them about issues relating to returning citizens. □

Washington, DC 20032

P.O. Box 54008
JOBS COALITION

