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Clements: Jobs training, the way out of poverty

by [Bill Clements](#) Staff Commentary



Student James Isensee learning how to make cabinetry. (photo Bill Klotz)

If Summit Academy OIC's Louis King had a mantra, it'd be: Show me the jobs!

King is executive director of academy, an adult vocational training center in North Minneapolis – also known as “the poorest, most dangerous neighborhood in the Twin Cities.”

A Jacksonville, Fla., native, King, 50, is doing something about that.

The retired Army officer, who made the rank of major in field artillery, has been working for 17 years to provide a counterweight to the economic disadvantages in North Minneapolis – 15 of those years with Summit.

King came to the Twin Cities with the Army; he was the ROTC recruiter at the University of Minnesota. He was busy during the first Gulf War in 1990-1991. King and soon-to-be wife, Beverly, lived at first in Burnsville “and couldn't find any other black people,” so they'd drive to North Minneapolis on weekends.

Eventually, they moved to the city's Bryant neighborhood and settled down. (They have three kids: Aja, Kamaria and Lauryn.) King retired from the Army and started volunteering at community organizations in Bryant and North Minneapolis.



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As King says: “I developed a passion for the people – became fascinated with the power of education skills and networking.”

King joined a community group, Two or More, in 1993, and in 1995 led the merger of that group and the Twin Cities OIC (Opportunities Industrialization Center), which resulted in Summit. He's been executive director ever since.

In the last few years, King has focused the mission at Summit, which is now all about job training.

Part of that was caused by necessity. The recession of 2005-2006 hit the nonprofit hard; in 2007, King had to start eliminating programs, which he described as “really hard.” The staff has declined from 75 to 45 since then.

The budget hit a high of \$4.5 million (a mix of tuition, government grants and private donations) in 2003 and then a low of \$3 million in 2006.

Programs aimed at immigrant communities were eliminated in 2007; youth programs went by the boards last year and this year.

“If we can't be No. 1 or 2, we are out of the business,” King says.

While the budget is now on its way back and has passed \$4 million again – it may hit \$4.6 million this year – the laser focus is on jobs in construction and health care, because that's what the market is demanding, according to King.

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Last year and this one, stimulus money from the feds has created a lot of funding for construction of public infrastructure such as roads. With projects at the U of M and the Central Corridor light rail transit and the VA hospital, more than \$2 billion in public work will break ground in the next two years, King says.

So that's where the focus is right now. (Next year, King says, Summit plans to unveil a big investment in health care-related jobs.)

One of the primary lessons the Army taught, King says, is how to create an environment, and that's what he aims to do at Summit: create the environment in which students can train, prepare for and then get jobs in construction.

"If you are going to put people to work, you need the education, you need access, you need the environment, the social network," King says. "That's what we do. We're working to build that social network."

King sees his job as pushing hard to create that social network to get more women and people of color into jobs that become careers. (King is 50, and so uses the old-fashioned term "minorities.")

And he's proving successful: King is one of the community-based leaders important in the negotiations that lead to the recent announcement from MnDOT that the agency would devote one-half of one percent of its federal highway dollars on training women and people of color for highway construction jobs—or \$6.2 million during the next five years.

That's a big win, a five-year march that ended well and sets good precedents for the future.

But King is equally proud of a new training program his school has established in partnership with Local 49 of the International Union of Operating Engineers, the heavy-equipment operators on road projects. Local 49 has a training center in Hinckley.

Right now, 19 Summit students are training in Hinckley. And it's not a cheap deal: Summit is spending \$90,000 to send the students there.

And it spent \$60,000 on a couple computer simulators that initially train the students in the classroom on how to operate bulldozers and loaders – the heavy equipment they're training on for real in Hinckley right now.

The No. 1 motivator behind the new training program for both King and Local 49 is jobs.

"That's our whole intent – to increase the number of minorities in our membership, so that when the contractors have a job where they have to meet minority-hiring goals, then we have the people to fill the jobs," says Gary Lindblad, director of Local 49's Apprenticeship and Training Program.

He says the Summit students have been "very responsive" and good workers, so far.

And Walsh Construction, one of the firms that has gotten work for the LRT for 2011, has already contacted Local 49 because "they've have heard about our program and are excited about it," Lindblad adds.

The union will continue the partnership with Summit as long as the economy allows.

That's a good move.

As King tells unions and companies that are behind on their minority-hiring goals for public jobs: "You can go ahead and continue with their current hiring practices," but 10 years from now when those baby boomers are retired, the unions and companies that are bringing more minorities into their projects now "are going to be beating your socks off."

The bottom line, King adds, with a smile, is that "demographics will finish what the civil rights movement started and then affirmative action continued."

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