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July 7, 2010 3:45 PM CDT

Local 49 prepares minorities, women to operate backhoes, other construction equipment

by [Brian Johnson](#) Staff Writer



Photo Bill Klotz

Shysen Turner doesn't have a background in construction, but he's training to be a construction operating engineer — in part — because the lure of the big machines was too much for him to resist.

Those humungous, dirt-moving excavators are especially appealing to the 35-year-old Maple Plain resident.

"That is my favorite toy so far," he said with a laugh. "That is the kind that people don't want to touch, because it is kind of intimidating looking. But I like it."

Turner is among the 19 students who will graduate Friday from the first-ever class of an unusual training program that prepares prospective construction workers to safely operate backhoes, dozers, cranes and the like.

What's unusual about the new program is that it's operated jointly by a union (the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 49) and an inner-city vocational training center (Summit Academy OIC).

Local 49 officials call it a "groundbreaking" initiative that came about after two years of planning and negotiating.

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Gary Lindblad, training director for Local 49, which represents heavy equipment operators in Minnesota and the Dakotas, said the collaboration with Summit Academy is part of an effort to get more minorities involved in construction, especially highway work.

"There are other training centers, but none that have set up a collaborative between a minority entity and a union-based training center," he said.

The program begins with 15 weeks of classroom work at Summit Academy in Minneapolis, followed by five weeks of hands-on training at Local 49's 64,000-square-foot training center in Hinckley.

To qualify for the program, students must have a high school diploma or GED and pass a basic math test. Program graduates learn everything from OSHA requirements to the art of digging trenches.

It's not as easy as it may appear. A "grades and stakes" course, for example, demands an understanding of math, elevations, cut joints, sloping and other details, according to Turner.

"It's not just digging dirt and moving it," he said.

It's no secret that contractors would like to see more dirt-moving these days.

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Although the building industry is mired in a bad economy, and construction sector unemployment exceeds 20 percent nationally, Local 49 representatives say there will be a need for more equipment operators once the economy regains its footing and older workers start to hang it up.

"That is one reason we are doing this — because of our retiring members," Lindblad said.

Meanwhile, if everything goes as planned, the Local 49/Summit Academy initiative will enlarge the pool of qualified minority workers, thus making it easier for contractors to meet project goals for a diverse workforce.

A big impetus for the program is the \$957 million Central Corridor project, which is positioned for heavy construction this fall.

The Metropolitan Council, which is overseeing the project, has ambitious goals for inclusion of minority and women workers.

Turner and another graduating student — Mari Simmons — said they would jump at the opportunity to work on the massive public works effort, which is slated to connect the downtowns of St. Paul and Minneapolis starting in 2014.

Like Turner and Simmons, most of the students in the Local 49/Summit Academy program are from the cities. Local 49 chose the Hinckley location for its training center, in part, because the land was affordable and the soils and water table were ideal for that kind of training.

The center opened in 2007 on a 400-acre site at 40276 Fish Tail Road in Hinckley, which is about halfway between the Twin Cities and Duluth. The center is set up to do "distance learning" as well as hands-on training, Lindblad said.

Three of the program's inaugural graduates, including Simmons, are women.

Simmons, 35, has worked mostly in offices until now. But construction appealed to her for a variety of reasons, including the exhilaration of working outside and driving the big machines.

"It's exciting," she said. "At the beginning of the day you get to work on a project. And at the end of the day you get to see your results, your accomplishments."

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