

# Preparing for hard, precise work at a living wage



Brian Aske, pacing enthusiastically, talked about the realities and rewards of being a heavy equipment operator. (Photo by Margo Ashmore)

## "Career opportunities with Central Corridor Light Rail Transit Project"

by Margo Ashmore

"In summer, we build roads. In winter, we can't build roads but there's a lot of demolition work. When it's raining, you can't work. You get paid only when you work. You have to save to get through the winter. A lot of our guys are laid off and get unemployment. You have to consider, can I make it working only 7-8 months. Or pick up a winter part-time job, a lot of our guys do that."

The instructor, Brian Aske, is talking about the realities of operating heavy equipment. He's from Local 49 of the International Union of Operating Engineers, based in St. Anthony Village at 2829 Anthony Lane S. The scene represents what's happening in the industry. In other classrooms, other instructors talked about carpentry, plumbing and electrical work.

At a construction expo at Summit Academy OIC Nov. 10, Leroy West, Summit's Vice President and Chief Administrative Officer, spoke with the NorthNews/Northeast. He said the unions noticed that a lot of the kids and cousins of aging union folks were choosing to be entrepreneurs instead of following them into jobs in the trades. While it was not initially an easy sell, Summit and Local 49 established a new pipeline of trainees.

Aske continued explaining the amount of training needed to work on some very expensive equipment, training that includes knowing how to maintain that equipment and prevent problems. He said mechanics could almost wear white shirts these days since so much is done by computer analysis.

When they're working, "we work 40 hours on average. Some will be working in summer from sunup to sundown on these paving projects. You also work all over the place." One day might start out in Plymouth, involve

a stint in Downtown Minneapolis and then Saint Paul, "or you could be two to three years on a single job."

"Traveling is a major thing." Not only does a worker have to have transportation to the job site, "you might have to be away from your family for sometimes a week, or a month. Can you handle that?"

West said in many cases the jobs Summit OIC trains people for mean that someone who might be making \$3,000 a year, can make \$36,000 a year after 20 weeks of training. Combine that with another family member making even \$10 or \$12 an hour, and you have a household that can make some choices, "buy a home. Have kids be stable in a school."

The expo focused on attracting trainees who could be ready to work on Central Corridor light rail construction which will be taking off by next spring and summer. Starting Nov. 29, according to Summit's website, "as part of the Pre-Apprentice Carpentry program, Heavy Equipment Operator, Weatherization, Cement Mason and Electrician will be offered. These programs are integral to career opportunities available with Central Corridor Light Rail Transit project."

Light rail work will be tricky, Aske said. "It's in the metro, downtown area where all the stuff is in the ground." Gas, electrical and fiber optic are all buried where they'll be working. "We'll have to work around that stuff. It's stressful, tedious, and important highly-skilled work. Very dangerous work. You earn every dime you make. I did that work for years, and some days it's fun. Other days I said there's gotta be a better way. I love it."

He suggested the potential students watch current job sites and see how meticulous the heavy equipment operators can be, and what they deal with.

### More about Summit Academy OIC

At Summit Academy OIC, where the slogan is "Training for Life" and the philosophy is "the best social service program in the world is a living wage job," new classes in various trades enroll new students every 10 weeks. In

addition to construction trades, Summit also trains community health workers. Every Wednesday at 10 a.m. there's a general information session. For information and to reserve a spot, call 612-377-0150. The school is at 935 Olson Memorial Highway in North Minneapolis, website saaic.org.

West explained that the emphasis on "building horizontal," highways, is relatively new and in response to the federal stimulus dollars. They typically teach how to "build vertical," in a yard where trainees construct and then deconstruct an entire house. There's

also a "green house" on the property, totally off the electrical grid, and they're training in energy efficiency and installing green roofs. Summit's Job Production Teams are watching for industries and projects most in need of new workers.

Students also experience a fathering program, learn life skills, and get financial literacy. "Someone from M&I Bank will talk on 'what does \$40,000 mean?'" Education at Summit Academy OIC is financial aid Title 4 eligible; that means students may get Pell or state grants for post-secondary education.

## At the NE School Showcase



Turnout at the Northeast Showcase was understandably light on Nov. 13, the first day of winter snow with the white stuff coming down heavy almost all morning. As Camille Holthaus of the Waite Park Parent Teacher Association put it, "we had some very good conversations with the families who came. And we exhibitors got to talk with each other, pick each other's brains." All east-side Zone 1 schools were invited to have displays and involve students in recruiting new students. School board member Jill Davis and member-elect Rebecca Gagnon stopped by, as did Area 1 administrator Mark Bonine.

Above, Shirley Poelstra talks with a family at the Edison Junior Achievement booth. The "JA Company Program" will have its first meeting at 3:10 p.m. Weds., Dec. 1 in Room 331 at Edison, and applications are available in Room 302B

(Photo by Margo Ashmore)



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