



- TOPICS ▶
- IN-DEPTH ▶
- CALENDAR ▶
- COMMENTARY ▶
- LINKS ▶

**SIGN UP FOR STORY ALERTS | PRINT | EMAIL TO A FRIEND | SEARCH**

Monday 2nd August 2010 01:12 PM

**First class of heavy equipment operators graduates through new union-community partnership**

By Barb Kucera, Workday editor  
20 July 2010

HINCKLEY, Minn. - Gerrod Williams made history July 9 as part of the first group of heavy equipment operators to graduate through a unique union-community partnership – and the first member of his class to get a job.

“I’ve been trying to get a job for so long above \$8 an hour,” said Williams, a St. Paul resident who worked at a McDonald’s restaurant before enrolling at Summit. “This program really lifted my spirits . . . thank you so much!”

Williams is benefitting from a joint venture between the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 49, a union of 13,000 workers in Minnesota, North and South Dakota, and Summit Academy OIC, a nonprofit educational and vocational training center working with adults in the most economically depressed neighborhoods of the Twin Cities.

[View video](#)

Nineteen students recruited through Summit participated in Local 49’s highly specialized, hands-on apprenticeship curriculum this spring. The program, which prepares graduates to work on Minnesota’s roads and bridges, involved classroom, online and simulator instruction followed by heavy equipment training at Local 49’s Hinckley training facility.

“Our doors have always been open wide to women and minorities, but we wanted to go the extra mile to ensure more people knew how to enter Local 49’s apprenticeship program,” said Glen Johnson, Local 49 business manager. “Today is a new day.”

Said Louis King, CEO of Summit Academy: “This training is like no other being offered locally and it gives our students – many with difficult backgrounds and upbringings – the tools they need to succeed. We are pleased to have partnered with Local 49 to fulfill our mission of teaching our students to be self-sufficient, regardless of background, economic status or ethnicity.”

**New opportunities**

Local 49’s 384-acre training center outside Hinckley, Minn., is equipped with various rigs, including bulldozers, backhoes, forklifts and cranes, all set as if they were on an actual job site to provide hands-on experience.

“I like working on the big dogs!” said Shysen Turner of Maple Plain, gesturing toward a large crane. He said he not only likes operating the crane, but enjoys mastering the mathematics needed to do the job right.

“I love numbers,” he said. Crane operators need to do variety of calculations to make sure they can safely lift loads, he said.

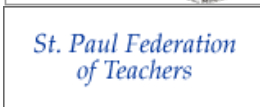
Mari Simmons of Minneapolis started out in the carpentry program at Summit, but jumped at the chance to become an operating engineer, a profession largely dominated by men. She is one of three women in the first graduating class.

“It is a great opportunity,” Simmons said.

To join the Summit Academy program, interested students had to meet requirements in math and grade-point average, be willing to travel, engage in a personal interview and pass a test of knowledge and skills related to the job of an operating engineer.

So they could concentrate on their studies during the training, they lived at a motel in Hinckley, only commuting home on weekends.

“That also acclimated them to the demands of the industry, where they will frequently have to



travel,” noted Alex Tittle, Summit’s education director.

**Stepping up to the plate**

Rep. Bobby Joe Champion, DFL-Minneapolis, who has worked to promote more job opportunities for women and people of color, praised the collaboration between Local 49 and Summit as an example of two organizations “stepping up to the plate” and establishing new relationships.

Local 49 is building the workforce of the future and providing much-needed economic opportunities for residents of urban communities, Champion said.

Given the state of the economy – and the high percentage of unemployed Building Trades workers – “it took courage and leadership” to initiate such a groundbreaking project, Champion said.

“That’s where we’ve got to take our hat off to the leadership of Local 49,” he stated. “There’s never a good time [to launch such an effort], but we have to do it.”

The joint venture between Local 49 and Summit was driven in part by federal and state programs that require more diversity among contractors bidding on public-sector construction work. While Williams was employed right away, other graduates will not be so fortunate. Local 49 Business Manager Johnson said early in the training, students are told about the unpredictable nature of construction work – and the fact they’re likely to spend part of their careers “on the bench.”

Some graduates may need to take other jobs while they wait for work assignments as operating engineers, but both the union and contractors urged them to keep in touch and maintain their skills.

“We want to have an on-going relationship with all these graduates,” said Gary Lindblad, director of training for Local 49.

For more information, see the [Local 49 website](#), and the [Summit Academy website](#).

**Video**

*Produced by John See, University of Minnesota Labor Education Service*

