

EVANSTON ROUNDTABLE

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Evanston Community Builders Inc. Constructs a Stronger Foundation for West Side

By Anna Sanders

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Young men and women of Evanston's West Side with employment barriers are welcomed with open arms by the Community Builders of Evanston, a unique program aiming to renovate the West Side and empower its youth. The program began eight years ago as an operation of the Enterprise Development Foundation, an Evanston not-for-profit headed by Daniel Cheifetz.

Bill Smith, executive director of Community Builders of Evanston, said Mr. Cheifetz believed the community's youth needed to be trained and given employment opportunities.

"We hire people who have had significant barriers to employment," Mr. Smith said of the Community Builders, adding that these barriers may include a minor criminal record or incomplete education. Workers are taught construction, property maintenance and repair so they may have practical skills for further employment or so they can start their own construction businesses in the future, he said.

Mr. Smith explained the Community Builders not only employs workers, but strives to provide them with life skills. Workers are given the chance to enroll in GED classes and attend homeownership training sessions.

Though Community Builders began as a training opportunity for the programs' participants so they could ultimately work for other companies, Mr. Smith said "companies were unwilling to take people." Eventually Evanston Community Builders, Inc. (ECBI), an RRP LEED certified general contractor, was developed to employ the programs' workers long-term.

Mr. Smith said ECBI began doing "basic construction stuff," but has "evolved to the point where we do significant jobs, stuff we're really proud of." The company built Boocoo Cultural Center, 1823 Church St. in 2007



William Weaver of Evanston Community Builders Inc., paints a sliding door for 1930 Jackson Ave., a project of Housing Opportunity Development Corporation (HODC).



and completed a total rehab and remodel of 1929 Jackson Ave. for Housing Opportunity Development Corporation (HODC) this year.

Mr. Smith said HODC was overwhelmed with the work done at 1929 Jackson Ave. "They really liked it an awful lot," he said. In their summary of the project, HODC stated, "By working through Community Builders, this project created jobs in the community and taught young men construction skills."



Sharone Miller of Evanston Community Builders, Inc. mows the lawn at the Chiuch Street Village townhouses, 1633-91 Church St.

Melody Bickhem, director of training and development for ECBI, said the rehab took at least eight months to complete. Ms. Bickhem is in charge of assigning shifts and jobs to ECBI workers. She said the workers are available for maintenance, minor plumbing, landscaping, janitorial cleanup and other work for buildings ECBI is contracted with. Ms. Bickhem said she also keeps up to date on community construction projects. "We like to see if we can be a part of community projects," she said.

Ms. Bickhem said ECBI also tries to use as many environmentally friendly products as possible. "We try to incorporate green building products in all the work we do," she said, adding the company's partner, Indie Energy, develops energy-efficient and environmentally friendly geothermal heating and cooling systems for ECBI projects.

Evanston Community Development Corporation received a \$50,000 Job Training and Economic Development (JTED) grant in 2008, some of which was used to assist the Community Builders. "[The grant] allowed us to bring in outside resources to help with training," Mr. Smith said. He added that the ECDC has been assisting them in finding grants and proposals.

Mr. Smith said the most rewarding part of his job is "being able to see people who were engaged in adverse behavior see that there are other ways [to live]." He added, "It's not often you can touch somebody's life and have them buy into the new notion that there is a better way."

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