

Framingham's Keefe Tech students build up for workforce

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MetroWest Daily News, Framingham

Posted Mar 3, 2016 at 5:49 PM

Updated Mar 3, 2016 at 5:49 PM

FRAMINGHAM – Corey Arroyo stacked interlocking concrete blocks on top of one another, fitting them together just right. If the blocks were about a ton each, rather than just a touch larger than cinder blocks, the wall he and his classmates built would be fit to hold back land from crumbling over the state's highways.

Arroyo, a Keefe Technical High School student, took part in the Massachusetts Construction Career Development program along with 33 of his peers. The program, led by workers from New England Laborers, is a MassDOT-funded training effort to get more young people interested in working on the state's infrastructure.

Over the course of the week, instructors from New England Laborers, a training academy based in Hopkinton for unionized labor workers, showed the Keefe juniors and seniors how to build channels for water inside manholes, do line and grade work to detect land elevation and build interlocking block walls, as Arroyo was. All those skills are ones used on highways across the state.

Tommy Lemon, a coordinator and instructor with the program, said MassDOT started the effort when they realized construction workers are retiring fast.

"It has been determined ... that construction workers have been an aging workforce. That is the birth of this program," Lemon said. "Workers are retiring faster than (their replacements) are coming in."

Included in the week-long training are safety tips, pep talks on work ethic and information on working in the union. The students then try their hand at each of the three tasks Lemon puts forward.

Corey White, a senior, said he's now thinking about becoming a laborer.

"I think it's really cool," White said of the program. "It teaches me a lot of things. It will help me a lot, it's something to put on my resume."

Having experience with hands-on work, Lemon said, is a big plus for future laborers. That's why, he said, the program targets technical schools. This was Lemon's first visit to Keefe Tech, and he had 15 other schools to visit in the course of the program.

John Brochu, Keefe Tech's director of career and technical education, said giving students real experience is part of the school's mission.

"Any practices you'd usually see at a job site is what they're doing," Brochu said. "It's much like we do in our programs."

Meeting another of the school's goals, Brochu said the training is giving students more skills and more choices.

"It's another option in life," Brochu said. "They accrue hours and it's a step toward an apprenticeship. It's a great thing."

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