



Construction's Mr. Chipps helps students find passion

By Richard Lyall

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Students from TDSB's Construction Trades Exploration Program pose at Toronto's Northview Heights Secondary School. From left are Northview principal Peter Paputsis, Caeden Loane (Northview), William Tennant (Wexford School for the Arts), Renzo Soriano (Northview), Angelicia West (Forest Hill Collegiate) and program head Elvy Moro.

— Richard Lyall, president of RESCON, has represented the building industry since 1991. More of his work can be seen at www.rescon.com. He can be reached at lyall@rescon.com.

After donning a hard hat and safety boots, Angelicia West knew she found her passion.

The 17-year-old Toronto student had struggled with her course load at Forest Hill Collegiate Institute.

But fascinated by her interest in TV's *The Property Brothers* and her late grandfather's career as a carpenter, she entered and excelled in a skilled trades program through a Toronto District School Board (TDSB) placement.

Learning from general labourers and other trades on site with builder Tucker HiRise, she finished near the top of her class and qualified this semester through the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program to enter a learning program with construction craft workers at Local 183 (labourers).

"I learned from different trades and had the time of my life. I also learned what it's like to be an adult. It's kinda stressful," she joked at a recent stakeholders meeting for her program. "You have to just do it, make some contacts and remember that safety is No. 1."

Angelicia and many other students credit Elvy Moro with helping them find their way out of uncertainty, and for some, hopelessness.

The 54-year-old teacher from Northview Heights Secondary School in north Toronto runs the Construction Trades Exploration Program (CTEP) which places Toronto District School Board students on construction sites across the city.

While some program participants, 16 and older, achieve excellence before entering CTEP, many of them have difficulty in the classroom setting. “For those kids, this program brings out the genius in them,” Moro says.

CTEP is playing a critical role for the construction industry and some big players know it. Rallying behind CTEP, builders and unions recognize they face serious skilled labour shortages over the next 10 years.

Program sponsors include RESCON builders Aspen Ridge, Tribute, Tridel, Daniels, Greenpark, Menkes, and Monarch, and unions such as Local 27 (carpenters) and Local 506 (labourers).

For a full semester, 22 students earn four full credits through the curriculum taught at Northview Heights, construction sites for hands-on internships, and earning a health and safety college dual credit at George Brown College.

But it’s during their 14 weeks on site when they get a hands-on taste of many trades: labourers, sheet-metal workers, electricians, plumbers, carpenters, tile setters, drywallers, HVAC and more.

“It’s a lot of learning but the hands-on exposure to all these different jobs helps these kids discover what they want to do,” Moro says. “The student gains experience, networks and makes contacts; and for the company, if they see a kid as a star, they have a known product in front of them. We all gain.”

Moro, the son of a bricklayer, is not only a skilled co-op teacher and networker: he’s a storyteller, too. When asked, the stories roll out on some of the almost 400 students that have come through the program since 2004.

Those stories often include this: “Here’s a student who couldn’t make it to class for nine o’clock, but they loved him (or her) on the site.”

Moro says he believes he’s the only high-school teacher offering this kind of program in Canada, and he loves helping students find their passion. But he sees the potential for so much more.

“We have over 100 schools (with TDSB): We only get two girls per year. And why am I only getting 44 kids per year?”

Moro’s dream is to expand the program from the TDSB to other school boards across the GTA, then Ontario and eventually to create a program that can be applied across the country.

“I live it and I breathe it. I’ve been doing this for about 10 years for this program. What’s the goal? I can bring the kids into the marketplace and it’s about finding the niche for those kids, allowing them to find their passion.”