

College helps new Canadians enter skilled trades

The Skilled Trades College of Canada is training masons to meet housing demands.



Dabbah Dib, left, and Salah Dib fled Syria and enrolled in a new bricklaying program offered by the Skilled Trades College of Canada. (Julien Gignac / Toronto Star)

By Julien Gignac Staff Reporter
Wed., Feb. 28, 2018

Salah Dib fled Syria about a year ago for a better life in Canada, one that would enable him to have a stable career he could excel at.

At a time when skilled masons are greatly needed in the GTA, Dib enrolled in an intensive pilot project at the Skilled Trades College of Canada. And it comes with incentives: Dib, along with nine other students, do not have to pay tuition and will be connected with steady employment in residential bricklaying when the program ends.

“In Canada, all dreams come true,” Dib said. “It’s a better life,” adding safety precautions were disregarded in Syria.

“Nobody there cares if you fall and die,” he said. “Here, safety is very, very important.”

Dib and his brother, Dabbah, who both fled Homs, chose the eight-week program because it was accessible, welcoming and encouraging to learn that employment would be fast-tracked, they said — neither have Canadian high school diplomas and they are still learning English.

“I don’t have the time, actually, it takes two years (to get a diploma),” Dib said. “No money, no honey, as they say.”

A lack of skilled bricklayers spurred the private college to offer the accelerated course.

“The trade has experienced a severe shortage in manpower and they can’t accommodate the amount of homes being built and it’s affecting productivity,” said Ralph Cerasuolo, the director of the college. “The majority of homes in the GTA, people want brick,” noting that Rescon, a builders organization, approached the college one year ago to set a program in motion to eventually meet demand in the area.

The impetus of the program, which is subsidized by the Ontario government, is to get more people into an industry, sometimes considered unattractive and dirty, Cerasuolo said.

There’s been a deficit in bricklayers since last summer, said **Richard Lyall, Rescon’s president.**

“The roots of the problem are that our training and apprenticeship system in Ontario is flawed, badly,” he said. “It’s really not setup for preparing young people to enter the trades,” likening the pace of change to a “supertanker starting to turn.”

An online job market report produced by the Canadian Government says that, from 2015 to 2024, there will be 4,100 bricklaying positions available but only 3,500 people to fill them.

Out of a pool of 150 students interviewed by the college, the ones selected for the program were the most likely to succeed, Cerasuolo said, adding that five of the 10 came to Canada from Syria.

Cerasuolo and Mike Di Donato, the operations manager, said their parents emigrated from Italy and that they understand the difficulty finding work in a new country.

“These are good people coming from other countries that are just looking for a better life,” Cerasuolo said. “These are solid people who can really help our economy. Here they are, just like our parents.”

The goal, said Di Donato, is to ramp up the number of students to 200 per year by 2020.