

what's working

training at-risk youth



Alba Fedrizzi
Hammer Heads Graduate

Nearly two years after graduating from a construction skills training program for at-risk youth in Toronto, Alba Fedrizzi can afford the rent for a bachelor apartment and has enough money left to save for a car.

It's a long way from sleeping on friends' couches, living in shelters or renting rooms here and there.

Fedrizzi, 27, graduated from the Hammer Heads program operated by the Central Ontario Building Trades (COBT) in the fall of 2013 and is an apprentice ironworker. She's well on her way toward meeting her goal of earning journeyman status by age 30.

Hammer Heads is a 12-week boot camp-style employment program that targets youth living in priority and under-resourced communities in Toronto. Since 2010, 194 Hammer Heads graduates have started registered apprenticeships in the construction industry, and 58 youth have been removed from social assistance for an estimated savings of \$904,449 so far. (See Hammer Heads Results by the Numbers sidebar.)

The program is "really changing kids' lives," Fedrizzi said.

Hammer Heads actually represents COBT's second attempt at a training program for at-risk youth, said James St. John, COBT business manager and Hammer Heads program director. In the early 2000s, the organization "failed miserably" when it tried to introduce youth to a two-day crash course on working in construction at the government's encouragement. Pressure mounted from the government to try

again. In 2010, representatives of the trades came up with a 12-week comprehensive skills development program teaching health and safety and soft skills like being on time for work and providing hands-on experience at various union training centers.

"We try to educate and train our youth to mirror the expectations of our employers so they can have access to employment but, more importantly, keep that employment for the long term," St. John said.

The program has three intakes of 15 youth each year. In April, the program experimented with running two intakes simultaneously in order to serve more youth.

To be eligible, youth must be referred by a city of Toronto job coach or social worker. They also must have completed grade 10 math, English and science and be between the ages of 18 and 26. Many of the participants live in subsidized housing or shelters.

The program starts with a two-day orientation followed by two weeks of health and safety training. Then the Hammer Heads visit 13 to 18 union training centers to learn about different trades and receive hands-on instruction.

"Not everybody understands how many different construction trades actually exist out there, so we try to expose the youth to as many as we can in our 12-week period so they can get a better sense and we can assess them on their mechanical ability in each trade," St. John said.

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The program also includes an academic component. Some students get help earning their GEDs. Others, including Fedrizzi, might take more advanced coursework, like a grade 12 physics class.

Much of the program's \$1.2 million annual expense is funded through in-kind donations from COBT affiliates and industry partnerships. Partnerships with companies including Williamson-Dickie Canada Co. and Stanley Black & Decker provide participants with work clothing, work boots, a toolbox and basic hand tools.

Early on it was a struggle to keep people motivated in the program, St. John noted. "They've had a lot of letdowns in life, and our program really seems too good to be true—that you can enter a program that is free, you can have access to these state-of-the-art training facilities and then graduate and be signed into a union and offered a job."

Bringing in past graduates to mentor and talk with current participants has helped increase buy-in, St. John said. The success rate (Hammer Heads who graduate and move on to an apprenticeship or postsecondary education) has grown from 88% for the first three intakes to nearly 100% for the most recent six intakes.

Another challenge is having work available, but St. John said governments are starting to recognize that they should hire subcontractors that provide a community benefit such as hiring at-risk youth.

The program shows that unions and contractors can be open to embracing workers from different cultures, St. John believes. "It's taken a long time to finally build up and create a reputation where these companies are looking for workers they typically wouldn't have employed otherwise," he said.

Since May 2013, Plan Group, an electrical, mechanical and communications subcontractor, has hired and retained five Hammer Heads graduates who are apprentice electricians. The company initially hired the graduates for projects



related to the Pan American Games hosted in Toronto this summer. Contractors working on the projects were encouraged to hire Hammer Heads graduates.

The apprentices were then sent to other Plan Group worksites and continue to work for the company. "They had a drive and the determination to do well and develop themselves in the industry," said Jacqueline Easton, Plan Group labour manager.

Hammer Heads Results by the Numbers

- 194** graduates linked to apprenticeships
- 5** graduates returned to postsecondary education.
- 169** graduates have worked for more than one year or are still connected.
- 58** youth removed from social assistance
- 11** women have participated.
- 9** aboriginal youth have participated.
- 15** residential labourers
- 16** industrial, commercial and institutional (ICI) labourers
- 29** plumbers and steamfitters
- 23** electricians



James St. John
Business Manager
Central Ontario Building Trades
Program Director
Hammer Heads
Toronto, Ontario

“They’ve tended to be some of our best employees on our jobsites, and we’ve never had a complaint from any of our contractors regarding a Hammer Heads’ work ethic,” said Terry Snooks, business manager of the United Association of Plumbers and Steamfitters Local 46 and COBT president. Local 46 has typically signed one or two participants from each Hammer Heads intake as a plumber or steamfitter apprentice.

The program does a good job of helping participants understand what will be expected of them at work, Snooks said. It can be little things like being the first one to go back to work after a coffee break, picking up the pace when they’re walking and being the last one to finish before a break.

The participants aren’t the only ones who learn from the program, Snooks said. “Hammer Heads really helps educate the government and our contractors on the virtue of hiring some of these youth at risk.”

Before she entered the program, Ferrizzi, who has lived on her own since the age of 17, was in and out of shelters and struggled to pay her bills. “I didn’t have the right concept of what it was to keep a job and how to manage myself,” she said. That changed with Hammer

Heads. “From day one, they put down the rules extremely clear that you have to be on time, waiting for the bus. You need to sit in the front of the class to show that you’re engaging in this program—trying to go above and beyond.”

As the only woman in the class of 15, she worked hard to prove herself. After completing Hammer Heads in August 2013, she joined Ironworkers Local 721 in Toronto and got a job working with steel beams and railings and welding.

She has been laid off twice during slow periods but has found new employment relatively quickly. She hopes to buy a car by the end of the summer. Once she earns journeyman status, she may consider checking out work opportunities in Alberta or even abroad.

“It was probably one of the best days of my life when they called me and said, ‘You’re starting tomorrow with Hammer Heads,’” she said. “My life is going back into order.”

To find out more about Hammer Heads, visit www.cobtrades.com/hammerheads.

by | **Kathy Bergstrom, GBA**
kathyb@ifebp.org