



BUILDING A FUTURE

Transforming the lives of St. Louis men
with tools, a trade, and proper training

By Jessica Vaughn

Not a minute after 6 a.m. on January 26th, 2015, fifteen men arrived in front of the Demetrious Johnson Community Center in St. Louis with nothing: no jobs, no future, and no hope.

For the next fourteen weeks they would work nine hours, five days a week—without pay—to transform the center to make it livable again. They framed walls, patched ceilings, painted drywall, and on Thursday mornings played chess.

But these men were doing more than giving new life to an old edifice. They were revitalizing their own lives. After three and a half months they emerged with careers, a promising future, and a new family. But most importantly, they left with a sense of hope. These men are the products of the Advanced Skill Workforce Centers.

The Advanced Skill Workforce Centers (ASWC) were formed early this year, when a group of painters from the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades District Council 58 began to transform St. Louis with an unheard of idea: find the worst of the worst guys from the neighborhood and put them to work. Find men with records and jail time, from gangs and drug rings; find these men and teach them to paint. After completing the program, the students would graduate with five certifications and the knowledge and drive to establish a stable career.

Although it was unconventional, District Council 58 knew they had a workable proposal; all they needed was a place to train. After one phone call to local community leader Demetrious Johnson they had a plan set in motion.



Forming an Alliance

Ex-NFL player Demetrious Johnson (DJ) returned to his hometown of St. Louis on a mission to make a difference, and he knew he had to start with the youth. DJ established the Demetrious Johnson Charitable Foundation and opened a community center near the Delmar loop. But the building needed as much TLC as the kids who would soon fill its halls.

The nearly hundred-year-old massive structure was moribund. Plaster walls crumbled, ceilings gaped with leaking holes, and broken windowpanes let in the heat, the cold and the noise. It was an inarguably dangerous place. Some would have thought it best to end its reign on the block with a wrecking ball. But the building had an important job to do, and despite Mother Nature and man's



Left: An ASWC student repairs a door before painting. Top right: On Thursday mornings the students play chess, an activity that is meant to stimulate critical thinking. Bottom right: A graduate poses with instructors during the graduation ceremony in May. Photos by Steve and Natasha Wayland, Frankie Edwards and Jessica Vaughn

best efforts to stop it, DJ was determined that it would prevail. All he needed was a little extra help.

The partnership between DJ and ASWC was a perfect fit. He had a crumbling building; the union had tools, paint and free labor. They both wanted to better the community. Working together made sense.

"It took about a meeting and a half and we were on board with DJ and his foundation, because it was all the same belief," Steve Wayland, ASWC leader says. "We had the same road that we wanted to travel. It was just incredible."

The passion for this program was real—neither DJ nor the council could wait to get started. It took less than a month after reaching an agreement for the first class to begin. The ASWC was alive and ready to change lives.

Building a Success Story

The ASWC has a simple philosophy, but one that generates big results.

"You've got to teach these guys to fish," Bruce Holt, Missouri lobbyist for the In-

ternational Union of Painters and Allied Trades, says.

It is an age old saying often forgotten in fast-paced modern life. It's a quick fix to give someone a job or a handout, but quick is also fleeting. It takes time, effort and dedication to show someone how to build a career. And so, the ASWC is teaching men to fish.

"If a young man can get up at 6 o'clock in the morning to work, and stay here without getting paid for 14 weeks, then they can do a job," DJ says. "That's what we saw—a commitment. When you have that type of commitment you can be successful."

The goal of the program is for each of the students to be placed in a full-time union career after graduation, and to also establish trusting relationships with those around them.

"A lot of these young men are told in [other] programs, 'We're going to do *this* for you, and *this* is going to happen,'" DJ says. "But guess what happens when they get to the finish line? There's no medal; there's nothing to take home. But *this*

[program's] finish line? When they cross it, oh man, they see the reward. They're getting a medal. They can stand on a podium and be proud of themselves."

The program receives hundreds of applications, but as of now ASWC only takes up to 15 students per class, three times a year. It might seem like a small number, but in today's economy it adds up.

When the first class graduated in early May, 13 out of the 15 students found full-time union work. Of the two students that didn't, one went to Florida to work for a non-union contractor, and the other followed his dreams to Hollywood where he landed a role in *Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean 6*. There has been only one complaint from an employer—the graduates were arriving too early on the job site.

Steve emphasizes that graduates who find jobs outside of the union are still considered successes as long as they make living wages. He says that members of other trade unions, such as bricklayers and boilermakers, have started to show interest in hiring students.



Top left: Joshua Washington demonstrates painting techniques in a classroom in the community center. Bottom left: Program leaders pose with the first student who was placed in a job during the program. Top right: A community center classroom before renovation. Bottom right: A community center classroom during renovation by ASWC students.

“Regardless of the [specific] trade training, they know the quality of training that they’ve received as far as being responsible and being valuable to a contractor. That’s what they see.”

At the end of the program, graduates will take away five certificates, namely OSHA 10, First Aid, CPR, Scaffold, and Lift.

Funding Positive Change

Since its launch, ASWC has been partially funded by donations from the District Council 58 Labor Management Cooperation Initiative. The donation helps with paying the primary instructor for ASWC and supplying tools and supplies. The rest of the costs are covered by the program leaders, Steve Wayland, Gregg Smith, and Rich Lucks.

Steve says they have applied for grants to supplement the costs not covered by donations, but have yet to receive any. Because of this, the program is severely under-funded. He continues to look toward businesses and other organiza-

tions to donate supplies, but says program leaders will continue to pay out of pocket as long as they need to.

“We firmly believe our program is making a difference in our communities,” he says. “Gregg, Rich and I are 100 percent committed to our vision of positive change for all communities we serve, so if it means we have to spend our own money to ensure success and help sustain our program, then it’s money well spent.”

The Students

Before finding the ASWC, many of the students were headed down a path that only led to two places: jail or a gravesite. But when you speak with the graduates and current students today, you wouldn’t guess that their pasts were blemished. These men are professionals.

“We told the guys when they left, ‘You’re not representing yourselves, you’re representing everyone that’s coming after you,’” DJ says. “The companies and contractors that we’re going to partner you with are going to look at you and they’re going

to base our program off you guys. It’s important that you guys go out there and handle your business appropriately.”

The students take this advice seriously. They understand that the mark they make in the workplace will have a radiating effect.

“Basically, we’ve become pioneers for everyone that’s coming behind us,” says graduate Stephan Wade. “I appreciate the opportunity that these guys gave us.”

The gratitude they have is visible. It’s in their smiles, handshakes, and quality of their work.

“[We are] seeing these gentlemen give back, and saying thank you,” Steve says. “It’s not a word thank you; it’s doing what they were actually taught to do and showing up for that contractor. That’s their way of showing appreciation, saying ‘You helped us, now we’re going to make it good on our end.’”

For some of the students, the quality of showing gratitude is natural. For others, it’s learned through the program. ASWC students aren’t just learning trade skills; they are learning life skills. Each student

who is enrolled in the program is required to play chess one day a week. This practice of critical thinking can be applied to workplace situations, such as figuring time management, strategy and how to play fair. Contractors have taken notice, and continue to return to the ASWC to find critical thinkers.

Family

When ASWC students graduate, they have built more than a career. They have built a family.

"It's a brotherhood," Terril Bams, first class graduate says. "For example, we still hangout and the program is over. We still come together, go out together and call each other. We're brothers."

The students form a strong bond with each other and also with program leaders.

Instructors become father figures, sometimes helping to pay for food, other times giving them a stern lecture. But on all occasions, they are there for their family. The students experience a feeling of trust and sincerity that some of them haven't encountered before.

"I have a few new brothers and sisters now, because of this program," student Jimmy Jones says.

"These guys motivated me to come every day. All of these people, they're my family. They showed faith in me, so I gotta have faith in them."

Community

The impact of the ASWC has already reached far beyond the graduates themselves. DJ has received positive feedback not only from employers, but also from student families and community members.

"They're not only changing their lives, but they're changing generations' lives," he says. "You're changing families whose daddies and mamas didn't have a job, or had brothers at home not doing anything. We are changing generations. That's what I'm so proud of."

The program has improved relationships between community members that weren't so keen on unions prior to the arrival of the ASWC. Now, the organization shines in a positive light.

"When we talk about the painters union it's looked at totally different in the African American community," DJ says. "They say 'Man, they are really doing what they say they're going to do. They're not hiring guys and putting them in union halls and sitting around not getting jobs. These kids are getting employed, changing their lives, taking care of their families and being responsible citizens.'"

DJ says the positive response coming from St. Louis is catalyzed by the sense of trust the program leaders have built with their students.

"Game recognizes game," he says. "Meaning, they recognize if you don't have their best interests at heart. They recognize if you are just trying to use them for your own personal gain; they understand that and they won't deal with you."

That's not the case with the ASWC.

"Here, we have no issues," he says. "It's amazing—I'm amazed. But when you sit down and think about it, we've kept our word about everything we said we were

going to do. And when you keep your word [with the community], and say you're going to do it and do it, they'll buy into it."

Thanks to the program, men who might otherwise be sitting on a curb or a

couch are standing up to shake the hands of future employers, coworkers and clients. They are rejuvenating their communities and bringing the whole of St. Louis together in a positive way by reducing unemployment, crime and hostility.

"People want to talk about all the violence going on in the streets?" DJ asks. "I know why they've got violence going on; these guys are violent because they don't have hope. You can't survive without hope. When they feel there's nothing left for them, they'll do whatever they have to do. We've got to change that."

Within their first year, the Advanced Skill Workforce Centers are already answering this loud call for change, fifteen hopeful men at a time.

Jessica Vaughn is MCC's Communications Director



Catholic Teachings On Work

Catholic teachings stress the importance of work in the lives of every person. In his third encyclical, *On Human Work*, Pope John Paul II focuses on the influence work has on the livelihood of the human race. Some excerpts of his encyclical are given below.

"Work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed in a sense becomes 'more a human being.'" ¶ 9

"Work constitutes a foundation for the formation of family life, which is a natural right and something that man is called to... In a way, work is a condition for making it possible to found a family, since the family requires the means of subsistence which man normally gains through work." ¶ 10

"Capacity for work—that is to say, for sharing efficiently in the modern production process—demands greater and greater preparation and, before all else, proper training." ¶ 12

If you would like to learn more about ASWC, please visit mocatolic.org to watch a powerful video testimonial from current students, graduates, and leaders of the program. To donate to ASWC please visit youcaring.com/ASWCares



Benjamin Brinker
Current ASWC student