

The Times

\$1M donation helps youths build a future

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SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

TRENTON -- Before he enrolling in the Isles Youthbuild Institute, Kevin Stevens was a teenager forced out of Trenton Central High School for poor attendance.

Roughly four years later, he has received his high school diploma from the Youthbuild program and plans to study graphic arts at the Art Institute of Philadelphia.

Yesterday, Stevens and other Isles interns served as tour guides at the nonprofit community development organization's celebration of the renovation of its 33 Tucker St. headquarters, which was accomplished with a \$1 million donation from NRG Energy.

David Crane, president and CEO of NRG Energy, said he was aware of the community development work his Princeton University classmate, Isles President and CEO Martin Johnson was doing, but didn't join in until 2004.

"It feels good to see the kids working and learning here," Crane said, describing the energy they produce as "the kind of global warming we want to see."

Although the program was created before the economic recession began, graduates of the Isles training program in environmentally friendly and energy efficient buildings are likely to benefit because the Obama administration has made those issues a priority for economic stimulus funding, Crane said.

Construction manager Scott Dedrick said the renovations were intended to make the building as comfortable and conducive to learning as possible, even though it added about 10 percent to the cost.

Windows were added to bring in natural light and finishes were chosen to minimize fumes because those studies show people are more productive with natural light and good air quality, he said.

However, Stevens focused on the human factors in explaining why Isles worked for him when high school had not.

He said education specialist Rukiya Blackwell talked him through his frustration several times when he considered abandoning the program as he had public high school, he said.

"Sometimes I'd be on my way out the door, but she'd stop me," the soft-spoken young man recalled.

"Don't leave now with nothing. At least, get your high school diploma. Walk out of here with at least that much," she would say.

While at Isles, Stevens rediscovered the artistic talent that won him a place in the advanced class back in the fourth grade. He was part of the crew that renovated the Isles building that was on display yesterday.

During renovations, he learned to hang drywall, use tools properly and make construction repairs.

By re-establishing access to unused floors, the useable space was expanded from 7,500 square feet to 22,000 square feet, Johnson said.

Isles won praise yesterday from Mayor Douglas H. Palmer, Mercer County Executive Brian M. Hughes, and

Freeholders John Cimino, Daniel Benson and Pat Colavita for transforming the building as well as students like Stevens.

Palmer told the youth their gray and black Isles T-shirts mean more than any gang colors they could wear. Such programs deserve all the funding they can get, he said.

"If we can spent money for prisons, then we can spend money to educate people, too," Palmer said.

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