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Constructive opportunities for young men

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Humidity's in the air, and summer clothes are out of the attic, among them the old hat about the Long, Hot Summer, in which urban violence is retribution for the sins of larger society.

So politicians reacted last week as they often do to urban gunfire, tossing money toward jobs for youth. The presumption seems to be that if only alienated young men had jobs mowing lawns or tending cash registers at airport shops - to pick two opportunities on a Milwaukee youth-jobs list - they wouldn't shoot each other.

Not to deny the redemptive power of work, but why exactly young men with short fuses wouldn't shoot each other in pointless arguments after work isn't clear. Previous youth jobs programs appear not to have stanching the blood. If anything, cause and effect seem reversed: Having an attitude that makes you shoot a guy in an argument might - I'm speculating, I know - stand in the way of holding a job in the first place.

Of course, another old presumption is that young men in Milwaukee hold such attitudes because they have no hope. Shafted, disinvested, deindustrialized, they know there aren't any family-supporting jobs, so they naturally get all nihilistic.

The nihilism seems less and less justified when we see, for example, the construction industry going out of its way to lure young people, particularly those in the central city.

Advertisement Construction, like many other industries, is speeding toward a wall when it comes to labor. John Topp, who heads a union-and-management group, says that contractors' work forces are dominated by baby boomers nearing retirement, while young people have grown reluctant to go into construction. "We're all going to be competing for people," he says.

When competing, his industry has advantages. The wages are good, above \$40,000 a year here. And you get paid while you learn - apprentices in construction earn a wage.

What they're competing against is that parents and guidance counselors aren't so hot on blue-collar work. When parents tell kids to aim high, they're usually talking law school, not girders.

For young people in the central city, this should be an opening. But blue-collar work has faded in people's minds there, too. And to become an apprentice, dropout-level academic skills won't cut it. Many young people in central city Milwaukee lack the schooling to enter the trades, says Topp.

So area contractors who hire union labor levy a fee on themselves to pay for a program, Big Step, that patches up the academic holes with tutoring and remedial classes. It works with a non-profit called the Wisconsin Regional Training

Partnership to teach skills employers are demanding.

The program is unlike any other nationally, says Big Step director Earl Buford, and unlike what has happened in Milwaukee before in that it is an industry paying to prepare its own work force.

There are critics. A University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee study last winter found fewer African-American apprentices than you'd expect from the area's demographics. The NAACP said contractors aren't doing enough, in an industry that has long hired by word of mouth, to find black tradesmen.

But Eric Parker, who heads the training partnership, points out that by offering contractors a ready supply of reliable candidates, the program's expanding the industry's family circle. Now, there are central city tradesmen who can tip off neighbors and relatives to opportunities.

And while 2,500 people have been through the program, about 500 going on to apprenticeships, the industry's still trying to improve it, says Buford: "This is still pretty new stuff."

From which the rest of us can learn this: While central city Milwaukeeans, particularly African-Americans, lag on economic measures, the broader community cannot be accused of utter indifference.

Contractors are paying to overcome deficits in schooling and trying to hire those in need. The average enrollee comes from a household with an income of \$12,000 a year. "We're really tapping into that low-wage work force," says Parker.

We frequently hear, in careless hyperbole, that Milwaukee is the worst of cities for African-Americans, marked by institutional racism. Perhaps a lot of Milwaukeeans harbor secret bigotry; I wouldn't presume to accuse them. But the construction effort is, if not proof, at least a sign of institutions seeking to *annul* racism.

That poverty remains doesn't discredit the effort. What can be asked of employers is not that they cure poverty but that they offer opportunity fairly.

And Milwaukee cannot be told it must ensure a job for all before it can expect peace. If opportunity is available - and we see that it is - then we can treat crime as crime rather than as some kind of comeuppance for our civic sins.

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