

Mentors opens shale training office in Hill
By Christian Morrow / New Pittsburgh Courier
Feb 13, 2014

Two years ago, Les Strader was on unemployment, having previously been a social worker and instructor at an alternative school. Today, he is a property manager for Marcellus supplier Southpointe Energy Resource Group, maintaining their fleet and doing roustabout work at various shale gas drilling sites.

“I tell people I did a lot harder work for a lot less money,” he said. “And it’s because of Kris and this program. Today I can make improvements to my house, donate to my church, and do a great Christmas for my family without falling two months behind on bills.”

The ‘Kris’ is Kris Kirk, whose Mentors Consulting and Training, with help from state Rep. Jake Wheatley, D-Hill District, started a program to take unemployed African-Americans right off the street and train them for Marcellus Shale jobs. Since graduating its first class in 2012, the program has placed more than 90 percent of its participants in industry jobs paying as much as \$80,000 per year.

Now, thanks to a \$150,000 contribution from Chevron, Mentors’ new nonprofit, Mentors Community Wealth Building Initiative has opened a training office in the Hill District and will be able to conduct more training sessions. The grand opening was celebrated by Wheatley, Pittsburgh councilmember Danny Lavelle, Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald and community partners.

“This is one of the prizes of this job; celebrating this partnership that we hope will only grow,” said Wheatley. “Having a 90 percent placement rate—I don’t know how you do that with the population they’re targeting.”

Lavelle said he is a huge fan of what Kirk and program recruiter Reggie Good have accomplished.

“I remember visiting the first class and the guys were saying, ‘you know, they’re never going to let us make the same money as those White boys,’” Lavelle said. “A few months later, when they came back and they’re making \$70,000, saying, ‘it’s true.’”

Fitzgerald praised the program and thanked Chevron, Wheatley and Lavelle for their support.

“People used to ask me how the urban population could benefit from the shale boom. This is how,” he said. “This is an opportunity that will be here for decades. I’m proud of what we’re doing in the region.”

For someone giving away \$150,000, Chevron representative Trip Oliver looked quite cheerful. But it’s not a gift, he said, it’s an investment.

“Kris won us over and convinced us to invest in this program and we have not been disappointed. They have a proud track record putting people to work,” he said. “We are proud to announce our

expanded support of \$150,000 because we want everyone to benefit from the opportunities this industry provides.”

Kirk was modest in giving credit to Good for his work, Wheatley for his initial support, and to attorney Peter Speaks, who wrote the minority inclusion section of the state bill authorizing shale drilling and development. She said, as a nonprofit, the new MCWBI will be able to access grants and public funds it could not while under her corporate banner, and it will expand.

“This is a wealth building initiative, targeting high-priority jobs,” she said. “Yes shale is a commodity, so demand goes up and down—but it will never go away, and it can’t be outsourced because it’s right under our feet.”

Kirk also thanked Ronell Guy and the Northside Coalition for Fair Housing who gave the program temporary office space, and said Mentors would be partnering with them and with Operation Better Block in Homewood on additional training classes.

“This is our niche—community-based outreach, mobile curriculum, with satellite locations and partners,” she said. “Our new website should be up and running soon, and with this new center we’ll be doing more consulting as well.”

The next class for shale industry jobs will begin in March. For details call the Mentors Community Wealth Building Initiative at 412-848-3266.