

Corporate funded program is training black men for the oil and gas industry.

By Anya Litvak / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

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There were eight black men in the North Side classroom learning about the Marcellus Shale boom, but most of them didn't believe the oil and gas industry was going to let them be a part of it.

That was in 2012. At the first class of the Hill District-based Mentors Community Wealth Building Initiative — which was launched with the goal of certifying “urban oil and gas thought leaders” — students were skeptics, according to Pittsburgh City Councilman Daniel Lavelle, who had dropped in to watch.

“They literally said, ‘These white boys will never let us make any money,’ ” Mr. Lavelle recalled.

As that first six-week course ended and another got underway, he began to get letters from graduates saying they indeed had been hired. And they were making money, or building wealth, as the program's name says.

Graduates returned to speak to newer classes.

“One came back and said, ‘They're actually paying the same [as the other workers],’ ” said Kris Kirk, who founded the nonprofit Mentors program.

Ms. Kirk was shocked: “I said, ‘Wow, I thought that was just a woman thing,’ ”

It's not known what percentage of workers in the regional shale industry are black, but it's not many.

A survey last year of 101 companies involved in the Marcellus Shale Coalition, an industry trade group, showed that 80 percent of the participating firms' workforce was white. The other 20 percent wasn't broken down any further racially.

Ms. Kirk makes it a point to explain to trainees who runs the industry and who has influence in government.

She shows the class photographs of those who served on Gov. Tom Corbett's Marcellus Shale Advisory Commission to emphasize that “these people don't look like me and they don't look like you.”

But in the year and a half that Mentors graduate Les Strader has been working for Southpointe Energy Resource Group, he has noticed the number of minorities in the gas fields increasing.

Mr. Strader joined the program in the spring of 2012. Before that, he had been laid off from one of his two jobs and his wife was pregnant with their second child.

“I was not in control,” he said.

He, too, had reservations about how welcoming the industry would be, but Mr. Strader was hired three weeks after graduating. He worked as a roustabout — a general laborer on a rig — for a year before being promoted to management.

The hours were brutal. At the peak, he was working 90-hour weeks. It meant traveling, albeit not as much as many other people in the industry, and being away from his family for stretches.

“These hours are long. The work is not easy,” he said. “You need to have some buy-in with your family.”

Ms. Kirk and her partner, Reginald Good, make sure to stress the hardships during their recruiting, which happens over social media, through word of mouth, and even door-to-door visits.

The program has been supported by \$200,000 from Chevron Corp., \$92,000 from Highmark, and \$80,000 from Ms. Kirk’s IT consulting firm, Mentors Consulting and Planning.

Chevron, which has hired some of the graduates and helped to make the whole thing possible, according to Ms. Kirk, is involved to ensure that all people in the region are able to benefit from the development of the Marcellus Shale, said the company’s spokesman, Trip Oliver.

Since 2012, 44 people have been through the program, and 39 have been hired by the industry. Average starting salaries range from \$60,000 to close \$80,000 with overtime, Ms. Kirk said.

The nonprofit guides the graduates in their job search.

The training is split into six weeks. The four weeks in the middle deal with industry training, like safety protocols, equipment and operations.

The first and final weeks are about how to behave in that environment. There’s a lesson on anger management, another on dealing with racism in the workplace, team building, leadership, “personality assessment and awareness.”

Just down the street from the Mentors office on Centre Avenue is the Energy and Innovation Center, which has similar goals — to give underemployed urban students the training to work in the growing energy field.

Mentors also recruits from community organizations on the North Side and in Homewood.

In 2012, the American Petroleum Institute commissioned IHS Global Insights to study the employment opportunities in oil and gas production for minorities. The report projected that by 2020 about 9 percent of the workforce will be African-American.