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The Bridges Construction & Renovation program, offered by the Green Bay Area Public School District, provides students a hands-on learning experience in the construction and renovation industries. Students have assisted in building four houses in partnership with NeighborWorks Green Bay. The program is currently at work on its fifth house at 505 5th St. Pictured at the construction site are West High School senior Ricardo Meza, left, program instructor Brian Frerk and West High School junior Rheanna Schmocker.

The Business News photo by Nancy Barthel

## Building a pathway to a construction career

School-district program has students participate in constructing new homes

“One of the challenges the community is facing is an acute lack of housing,” that is the reality in Brown County, says Noel Halvorsen, president and CEO of NeighborWorks Green Bay, which has its offices at 437 S. Jackson St.

“During the past decade, household formation has outpaced building permits by nearly 2,000 units in Brown County, and nearly 20,000 across the state,” he said. “A factor in this housing shortage is a lack of sufficient construction workers and tradespeople.”

That’s where Bridges Construction & Renovation, a program of the Green Bay Public School District, has stepped in to be part of the solution.

Established in 2015, Bridges is an educational pathway within the school district which offers students a community-based, hands-on learning experience in the construction and renovation industries. The program works in partnership with NeighborWorks Green Bay, Greater Green Bay Habitat for Humanity, the Brown County Home Builders Association and Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC).

This 2019-2020 school year marks the fourth time Bridges’ students have participated in a new home construction. The home, at 505 5th St., is funded by NeighborWorks Green Bay and the City of Green Bay’s New Homes in Your Neighborhood Program.

“Our partnership with Bridges, engaging high school students in homebuilding, is one way we can help grow the construction workforce in our community,” said Halvorsen.

The program has been open to 12 students each school year. But because of its popularity, the school district is expanding Bridges to offer 24 slots for 2020-2021.

Based at West High School, interested juniors and seniors in the school district are required to apply to Bridges. Students attend class two days each week and work on the job site for three hours three to four days each week. They earn three high school elective credits and five credits from NWTC in the areas of introduction to carpentry, floor framing systems and building codes.

The instructor is Brian Frerk, who is in his second year teaching and has a long history in the construction industry. He last worked as a project manager for Valley Cabinets in De Pere.

His wife, Lori Frerk, is principal at Green Bay East High School. “For years she’s been trying to recruit me to teach,” Frerk said. “There’s a huge shortage of tech ed teachers.”

He doesn’t have a traditional teaching degree but his experience in the industry and as an Army drill sergeant

provided him with the pathway to teach.

“I always loved teaching,” he said. “There’s not enough young people in the trades” and they need to know “they can make a good living.”

Bill Monfre, who retired in January 2020 as president and CEO of Quality Insulators Inc. and Asbestos Removal Inc. is on Bridge’s advisory board. “This is a tremendous program focused on providing young men and women with relevant construction skills for direct employment after high school or for continuing their post-secondary education in the construction trades,” he said.

“There’s a large demand for skilled workers in the construction trades,” Monfre said. “The trades provide exciting and satisfying careers for many. The trades also allow for quicker access to the workforce without significant student debt and tremendous opportunities to advance the new technological opportunities being

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embraced across the industry.”

The two-story home Bridges’ students worked on this school year has three bedrooms and two and a half baths, with a detached 24’ X 24’ garage.

“When we started in September the lot had been cleared in summer,” Frerk said. Students saw the basement dug and poured, and while the initial work of the structure was completed, down the block at another

home, students built a garage and a new porch.

As the new home progressed through fall and winter, students worked on the floor, walls, stair framing, siding and interior finishes. With school closures because of the coronavirus, if time allows, when it comes to the electrical and HVAC, “They’ll be able to shadow those projects,” Frerk said. The original plan also called for students to build the garage.

Ricardo Meza, senior at West High School, admits when he started the program he had a big learning curve ahead of him. Now, “I love being a carpenter,” he said. “This is actually a job. You’ve got to take it seriously.”

He’s looking forward to finding a construction job when he graduates.

For Rheanna Schmocker, a junior at West High School, being on the job site is “the best part of my day. I know I want to be an electrician,” she said.

Her goal for summer is to find a job that will give her experience in the electrical field and, after graduation next year, she plans to pursue an apprenticeship.

Schmocker is proud of the work she’s done on the new home. “It’s going to be something I can drive by when I’m older and show my kids,” she said.

Several 2019-2020 graduating seniors are pursuing career options related to their Bridges’ experiences, including architecture, engineering and the NWTC carpentry program. “I had a couple that went directly to work,” Frerk said.

Since he was hired as the instructor, Frerk said his goal has been to make Bridges Construction & Renovation available to more students. For the 2020-2021 school year, the program is being expanded to two 12-member classes that will work on a NeighborWorks home renovation. Renovations are a “huge sector” up and coming in the construction industry, he said.

“I’m proud of the dozens of young men and women that have built homes with us through this program,” said Halvorsen of the relationship NeighborWorks Green Bay has with the school district. “I’m inspired by the care and commitment they show and excited that they get this ultimate hands-on experience using their energy and creativity to reshape the neighborhoods where they live.”

Monfre encourages other professionals in the trades to get involved with Bridges Construction & Renovation. “There are opportunities for expanding this program with additional resources the business community can embrace and provide,” he said.