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# BUILDING Opportunities

Alumni and district join forces to keep building trades class flourishing | *Mike Richie*



**S**imilar to many struggles school districts encounter, in 2008 the Northland Pines School District's (NPSD) Board of Education was faced with a tough reality. They had an exceptional, hands-on program offered for students in the building trades' field that was causing an economic and financial hardship on the district. Their struggle was amplified by the importance of this program to the students and community.

The NPSD is located in Vilas County, in the northern part of the state. The district realizes the importance of producing graduates who have the knowledge and abilities to thrive in our local and global economy. Aside from tourism, construction is one of the main industries in our area, employing 12 percent of our workforce with carpentry being the most common occupation for males in our county.

Even though the district strives for all students to continue onto post-secondary education, the board could not ignore that 58 percent of our residents' highest degree is a

high school diploma. These statistics, gathered from the 2006-2010 American Community Survey provided by the U.S. Census Bureau, solidified that our high school building trades program is an essential tool for the students, families, and businesses in our county to succeed and retain qualified and educated workers necessary to our local economy and workforce.

#### ■ Stuck

At the end of the 2007-08 school year, the students in the Building Trades course had completed their three-bedroom, two-bath

ranch-style, home building project — unfortunately the home did not sell by the June cutoff date. There had been many interested individuals, but, much like the rest of the housing market in 2008, no serious buyers.

The district was confronted with insurance and materials bills and a house in their parking lot unable to move to a final destination. School building trades programs are no strangers to these problems, but the Northland Pines School Board needed to make a decision to continue or cancel the program for the 2008-09 school year, or seek an alternative solution.

#### ■ Alumni Partnership

The alternative solution came from two former Northland Pines High School and building trades class graduates, Glenn Schiffmann, owner, and David Cox, vice president of CornerStone Custom Builders.



A partnership with a local construction company allowed Northland Pines School District to continue its respected building trades class.

It was proposed that for the next school year, CornerStone Custom Builders would supply all the materials for the building project and assist in the design. Northland Pines students would supply the labor and enjoy the educational opportunities to be obtained from this type of partnership. At the end of the building project, CornerStone Custom Builders would be responsible for the sale of the home or moving it to one of their selected sites, alleviating the costs and burden from the district.

After discussion and collaboration of the proposed partnership, the school board and CornerStone Custom Builders entered into an agreement for the 2008-09 school year. Knowing that the district would not be faced with this financial burden in the future, the school board was able to settle on a bid received for the 2007-08 home and it was moved just prior to beginning the new home-construction process for the next school year.

### ■ The Class Goes On

In June, the 2012 Northland Pines High School Building Trades class completed their fourth home under this partnership and their 24th consecutive home for the building trades program. The program has allowed students the opportunity to learn

valuable skills for work in the world of building trades and also important life skills.

"This was a great partnership to enter into," stated Schiffmann. "Our staff, purveyors, and subcontractors who assisted the students over the past few years are all very proud and enthusiastic to continue the program each year. The hands-on opportunity given to the students seeking to enter into the building trades profession is invaluable."

Several of the subcontractors that help CornerStone Custom Builders oversee the home's construction share

the sentimental ties of being former alums to the program.

"I enjoy working with the kids each year and remember how much fun I had in my building trades class at Pines," said Rick Neis of Muskyland Plumbing. "Personally, it has come full circle for me, fostering my drive to continue my father's business and our family plumbing tradition in the Northwoods. This program has allowed me to give that experience back to the students."

### ■ Rigor

The students participate throughout the entire construction of the home from project design, permitting, safety training, framing, and finishing. In some years, they even get the opportunity to see the home after it gets set on its foundation.

The course also ties together several core elements across the Technology Engineering department's curriculum. It exemplifies rigor and relevance for any student



State Superintendent Tony Evers awarded Northland Pines School District and Cornerstone Custom Builders a 2012 Standing Up for Rural Wisconsin Schools, Libraries and Communities Award.



who has the desire and drive to explore a future in design, engineering, project management, entrepreneurship, or a specialized trade within the construction field.

“One of the main advantages of this partnership is that the students are now accountable not only to the instructor, but also to an owner who will be inspecting their work on a regular basis,” stated Bill Rowden, retired NPHS Building Trades Teacher. “The students get a better understanding of true accountability in the business world.”

“It was essential for us to keep this program for our students and community,” said Richie. “We believed in it and so did CornerStone Custom Builders. By joining together, the building trades program has grown into a vital resource for our students and a rewarding experience for many local contractors. This program prepares and produces future builders, trade professionals, and business owners which are a few of the more prominent careers in our area.”

### Other Partnerships

In addition to Cornerstone Custom Builders, a number of other subcontractors contribute to the class. “We could not do this alone without

the strong partnership between the school, material suppliers, subcontractors, and CornerStone staff,” Schiffmann said.

Some of the other contributors to the program include: Schneider Electric, Muskyland Plumbing, A&B Drywall, Alpine Insulation, Richco Structures, Eagle Lighting, Custom Components of Eagle River, Inc., Custom Millworking, Inc., Pella Windows-VerHalen, Torborg’s Lumber - Mid-Continent Cabinets, Closet Tier’s Etc., The Jeske Company Inc., and Hintz House Movers.

### Statewide Recognition

Recently the partnership received statewide recognition from State Superintendent Tony Evers, who awarded NPSD and CornerStone the 2012 Standing Up for Rural Wisconsin Schools, Libraries, and Communities Award.

“These projects support the foundation of their rural communities and help students find a place and purpose in their lives,” Evers said.

The district and CornerStone Custom Builders both agree that the most significant aspect of this partnership is that they are providing the students with the education and opportunities to be successful after graduation, either on a path to continue their education at a college or technical school or in a construction career.

As one former graduate of the program, Nathan Gebhardt, stated, “We will use these skills for the rest of our lives as future home owners, or possibly in a career.” ■

*Richie is superintendent of the Northland Pines School District. He can be reached at [mrichie@npsd.k12.wi.us](mailto:mrichie@npsd.k12.wi.us).*

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— program graduate, Nathan Gebhardt

