

Students gain skills, and seniors get safer housing

By **Stefanie F. Seldin**
and **Jay Spector**

Jose Gonzalez, 23, dropped out of high school in 10th grade. He was fortunate to find Project WOW, a property-maintenance skills and GED-preparatory program for young people without a high school diploma run by JEVS Human Services.

Gonzalez and his classmates volunteer for Rebuilding Together Philadelphia, a nonprofit that renovates owner-occupied homes for low-income families. Project WOW (World of Work) students and other Philadelphia tech students are regulars at block builds, where Rebuilding Together Philadelphia repairs 20 to 25 homes in a single neighborhood over several days.

Clarita Edwards, 72, a 40-year resident of Mantua, has a history of falls, including one out of her bathtub when she grabbed for a nearby towel bar and pulled it off the wall. Today and next Friday, Project WOW students will be repairing Edwards' home, helping her remain there safely and giving Gonzalez and his classmates valuable practical experience.

Edwards' home is one of the 25 that Rebuilding Together Philadelphia will repair in Mantua with its partners and hundreds of volunteers.

The Harvard Graduate School of Education reports that roughly 30 percent of the job openings projected over the next decade

will require some education beyond high school but not necessarily a four-year college degree. One of the best ways to prepare for these opportunities is through programs like Project WOW, which create career pathways by providing young people with technical and academic skills while also offering participation in work-based learning.

For young adults like Gonzalez who have not succeeded in traditional classrooms, these hands-on learning opportunities are the key to academic and workplace success. Rebuilding Together Philadelphia's home repair work provides that work-based learning opportunity.

Rebuilding Together Philadelphia's volunteer occupational therapist identified the repairs necessary for Edwards to live in her home safely. Students will secure a railing on the front steps, repair a bannister, install grab bars and new lighting, and remove old carpet and replace it with new flooring (to prevent tripping and breathing problems), among other projects, to meet 25 health and safety goals established by the National Center for Healthy Housing.

Repairs for seniors are literally lifesavers: Falls are the leading cause of injury-related deaths among people over 65. More than 2.4 million people over 65 were treated in emergency departments for injuries from falls in 2012 alone, an increase of 50 percent over a decade. Falls

are also costly: One hip replacement costs \$37,000; a grab bar costs \$37.

Low-income seniors are doubly disadvantaged: They are neither physically able to make home repairs nor are they able to afford a contractor.

The Rebuilding Together Philadelphia-Project WOW partnership is clearly a win-win: Students gain valuable work experience, and low-income seniors have the ability to age in place safely.

"Working hands-on and volunteering with Rebuilding Together Philly was the easiest way to learn," Gonzalez said. "When you're working hands-on, you need to use your common sense and what you've learned in the classroom to figure out the right way to do a job. ... The volunteer project we completed connected well to what we learned in the classroom. ... It was a great experience.

"I would love to work for Rebuilding Together Philly one day because they have passion for helping others, and I want to do that, too."

When we expand this program, we'd love to have him.

Stefanie F. Seldin is the executive director of Rebuilding Together Philadelphia.

✉ sfseldin@rebuildingphilly.org

Jay Spector is the president and CEO of JEVS Human Services.

✉ jay.spector@jevs.org

