

PROGRAMS: Project WOW

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Roxborough man sees a bright future on the horizon



Bayir Hodges learns the building trades.

Growing up in Philadelphia can be a challenge for any young man, but when those challenges include unintentional trouble with law enforcement and dropping out of high school, a bright future can often look dim. Luckily, for Roxborough resident Bayir Hodges, there was an organization there to help once he made the decision to start a new life for himself.

After a misunderstanding that went too far resulted in a robbery charge, Bayir was forced to spend a few weeks in juvenile detention. Unfortunately, this experience helped send him into a state of depression and in 2017, at the age of 16, he decided to drop out of high school.

Without a high school diploma, future options were limited, and Bayir spent the next two years wasting time in the streets. His mom had mentioned a potential opportunity called JEVS Project WOW (World of Work), which offered the chance to learn skills while also attaining a high school diploma, but Bayir brushed her off.

However, his future changed the night he decided to walk to the local store. Bayir, who is 6'3 and 250 pounds was minding his own business in a hoodie when a patrol car targeted him solely thanks to his imposing presence. "They pulled up on me out of nowhere and for no reason before searching me," Bayir remembered. Accused of prowling and loitering, the encounter left him shaken, and Bayir says it is what finally changed things in his life.

"This incident woke me up to take the JEVS opportunity seriously. If something happened, I wouldn't even be able to pay \$500 for bail. I realized I had nothing to fall back on if anything went wrong. It made me think about what life is about and that I want to make something of it."

He immediately decided to reach out to JEVS and that is when he met Sylvia Ocasio. Youth Project Manager at JEVS Human Services, Sylvia has been running Project WOW out of Orleans Technical College in Northeast Philadelphia for years. Project WOW offers a free, 22-week session of skills training, GED/high school diploma attainment, and job placement assistance for 18-to-24-year old's who did not finish high school. Bayir was the perfect fit.

In a very short time Bayir turned his life around. Project WOW offers enrollment in a high school diploma program through Penn Foster and Bayir jumped at the chance to attain his diploma. At the same time, Bayir learned the world of property maintenance, and a passion for the building trades was ignited. He was such a success that after graduating last month, he was offered a paid internship to work with the next Project WOW program as an advisor. Additionally, JEVS recently surprised him with a scholarship to attend Orleans Tech, where he will spend six months learning HVAC before heading out into an in-demand career.

"It's unbelievable to be offered a scholarship. Miss Sylvia is the one who gave me the news and my experience with JEVS has been nothing less than life changing," said Bayir. "Before, I was messing around, playing poker with my life. Now I wake up with a purpose and a need to get things done. It's a great feeling. From the moment I met Sylvia she was pushing me to succeed and when she described all of the benefits of the program, I really became intrigued. She brought me in when I had nothing going on for myself. I didn't even have a job and was living every day with nothing. It was boring. This clicked right away."

Sylvia sees so much of herself in the students she mentors each year and knows what the right spark and motivation can do. "Bayir has been committed to this program from day one and I can't tell you how excited I am to watch him soar," said Sylvia. "We help to provide a path forward and if the will is there, success comes next. Bayir has a lot he can bring to the next class as a mentor, and this is just the beginning of a wonderful journey."

Since he learned to build a house in the property maintenance program, Bayir has been using his new building trades skills to help at the houses of friends and family. He also earned his driver's license, something that will be necessary for future jobs, and he obtained three construction certifications as well.

It takes a special person to have the will to create a better life for themselves, and Bayir is doing just that. While the journey thus far has been bumpy, a bright future now awaits a young man with so much promise.