The Construction Academy class with John Martin (center).

A Deafening Shout for Construction

Construction Academy gives students chance to learn valuable job skills

By: John Martin

Imagine you're doing construction work with a group of teenagers who speak with their hands and hear with their eyes. Can you sense the picture I'm creating? Then you're able to feel these kids need for acceptance to a world of possibilities toward a career in the building industry.

I have supervised and instructed 10 different construction academies and this was the first group that demonstrated abilities that usually required several weeks of training. These five extraordinary youths stayed extremely focused while working – without distracting themselves on the main task at hand, carefully constructing their projects as a team, and wholeheartedly keeping a positive attitude from the get-go.

What makes them different than others? It is "our perception." There is a tremendous loss taking place in our society when we are not willing or able to confront our fears about helping and hiring deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, who can gift us with their intelligence, talent, skills and humanity.

Larry Cole, director of Post High School Services and Todd Reeves, superintendent at the Washington School for the Deaf, approached Jeanne Bennett, Youth Workforce Program Director at Educational Service District 112 (ESD 112) for ideas about helping their students develop skills to enter into the job market. Ryan Blodgett, workforce specialist at ESD 112 came up with some ideas that could be incorporated into a program developing work ethics, building skills and daily training geared toward an entry level position starting in construction. When we all came to an agreement, with the help of two full-time interpreters, the fall construction schedule was put in motion.

Each day we started off with classroom instruction of math lessons pertaining to the current projects. Next, we discussed what we expected to accomplish, then we broke up into working-partners, and then we worked on our individual tasks. The interpreters (only one per day) were excellent, transferring my verbosity through their hands and body language to the students while watching their hands for conversational communication. As I picked up on a word and could speak with my hands, I gained more of their acceptance in the challenges I placed before them. Students were very "in-

Above left: John Martin shows students proper tool usage. Above right: Students measure supports for tread bridge. At left: John Martin with a student on the tread bridge built by students.

tune" and "super-sensitive" when working with construction tools and working in different environments. They were constantly aware of each others location, they showcased natural safety behaviors, and they worked with a happy outlook on life.

It surprised me how incredible the communication was that took place as the mathematical information was going back and forth between myself, the students and the interpreter. They understood the math concepts presented before them in their own particular way, asking questions, going up to the dry-erase board and rewriting the math work, and giving other examples to reach the same conclusion. We applied math by converting numbers into decimals for measuring, calculating the walk areas distance and grades, and layouts and assembly. It felt marvelous to have such engaging students during the lesson plans.

Our first task was to instill a work ethic through labor. We cut an 8- to 12-foot swath 2,000 feet long through blackberry bramble making a path. We chopped, pulled and tossed away blackberries, removed roots and rocks, leveled out the walking areas, reinforced embankments with rocks, covered the trail with bark-mulch, and built a tread bridge over a spring creek at the end of our pathway.

Our next task was to build an outdoor stage for a local coffee house. Occasionally, we had to deal with cold rainy days. By stretching a tarp overhead and setting up a work station, we created the perfect work area. Then we laid out the location of the piers between two older trees. Next, we framed the deck and set posts, squaring-up and leveling the framing. We framed in the rafters using the Pythagorean Theorem and angles on our power miter saw, and finally installed the deck boards and attached a step. The Coffee Home liked it so much it asked us to build a single musician platform inside. I'm sure the free hot chocolate helped motivate the youth as the weather became colder.

The trail clearing crew on the tread bridge.

I am very thankful to have participated in bringing construction knowledge, with the help of an interpreter, by teaching them applied construction mathematics, building techniques and safe work habits to name a few. These youth anticipate future careers in the trades. They are waiting for those of us with the means to make a difference in their lives to take a risk and reach out to them. This could be your unique opportunity to become agents of change by serving the interests of the deaf high school graduates and empower their lives with a deeper sense of purpose.

Finally, the value of expressing an interest in a younger person is priceless. Just remember, "The deaf can do it!" If you have further interest in assisting a student from WSD, call Larry Cole at 360-696-6525 ext. 4370, or visit www.wsd.wa.gov.

John Martin is a consultant to the Oregon Building Congress.

The trail clearing team cut an 8- to 12-foot swath 2,000 feet long through blackberry bramble