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Program draws people of color, women to Rochester building trades

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Before discovering his true calling as an International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 86 journeyman-wireman, Kereem Berry worked odd jobs with little career direction.

Then, in 2007, he packed up his apartment and moved from Manhattan to Rochester. He knew he needed a change.

After meeting with the IBEW's Joint Apprenticeship Training Committee coordinator, an introduction initiated by a former co-worker, Berry began his skilled trades journey.

Berry, who became a model wireman, impressed local leaders of the building trades, most notably, Dave Young Jr., who served in the past as business manager of Local 86 and president of the Rochester Building & Construction Trades Council, AFL-CIO.

Young recruited Berry to head the Multi-craft Apprenticeship Preparation Program/Project Phoenix (MAPP). This year-long construction training course prepares men and women from under-served communities to enter into actual union apprenticeships.

Tiny percentages of Blacks, women in building trades

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 7% of working men in construction and extraction occupations are Black, and only 4% of everyone working in those fields are women. The apprenticeship preparation program works to change that disparity by opening doors to disenfranchised individuals who would not have been introduced to construction otherwise.

"Helping to diversify the trades is not only the right thing to do but federal and state participation language in project labor agreements requires it," Young said. "Unless there is continued pointed recruitment, the day is going to come that the work pool for the trades is going to struggle."