

Making college and careers real

Umoja blends counseling, academics, real-world experiences

by Maureen Kelleher

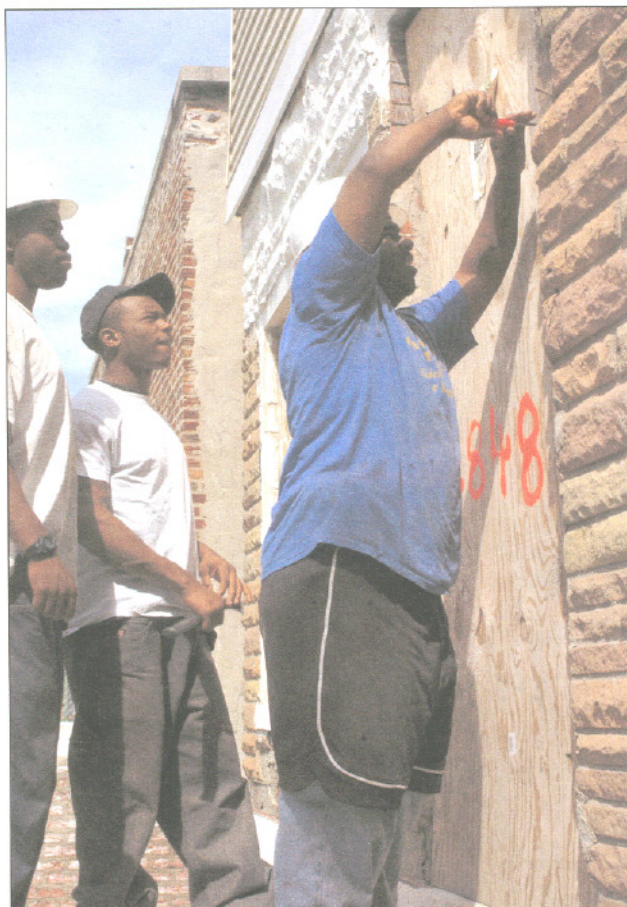
At first glance, Larry Doss and Ashley Banks don't seem to have much in common. Doss is a quiet young man who struggled to get average grades, "but the effort is still there," according to Mike Dimitroff, one of his teachers at Manley High School. The talkative Banks, now a senior with a B+ grade average, is considering majoring in architecture at a top-level university.

But Doss and Banks both love to work with their hands. This summer, they both won places on a demolition crew for a home rehabilitation project. As a result, Doss, who graduated in June, made key contacts that could help him land a coveted apprenticeship in the building trades; and Banks, who entered her senior year this fall, got a bottom-up view of architecture.

The house rehab project was organized by the Umoja Student Development Corp., a nonprofit agency based at Manley. It's but one link in a chain that Umoja has forged to lead more students into college and careers. In addition to providing real-world projects that blend work experience, community service and leadership development, Umoja also provides students with support to meet their academic and personal challenges. In the process, it removes the barriers that have separated college-bound students from those looking only to get a good job.

Along with the city's Gallery 37 arts program and the related Tech 37, Umoja, which means unity in Swahili, is the newest wrinkle in what traditionally was known as vocational education. As schools narrow their focus on academics, these outside partners are bringing academics to life and helping students explore the workplace.

"We're definitely making college and careers real for students," says Carmen



Manley High students involved with the Umoja Student Development Corp. house rehab project begin another day of demolition. The summer crew prepared the house for renovations that started this fall.

Mahon, Umoja's career and college counselor. "They weave into each other."

In the six years Umoja has been at Manley, the West Side school's graduation rate has improved and more of its graduates enroll in college. The graduation rate for the class of 2002-03—62 percent—was an 8-year high. (Official data for 2003 are not yet available.) More than 70 percent of Manley's 2003 graduates were accepted to college, compared with less than 10 percent in 1997.

A student achievement report found that seniors who were highly involved in Umoja-related activities were more likely to enroll in a four-year college than those with lower participation levels.

"This is extraordinary for an inner-city, low-income, minority high school," according to the 2002 report by G. Alfred Hess of the Center for Urban School Policy at Northwestern University. The authors credited Umoja for contributing to the college enrollment gains.

A unique partnership

Umoja is the brainchild of Lila Leff, a youth services worker whose credits include Edge/Up, a North Side partnership among high schools and community agencies to improve access and job training for CPS students. (See CATA-

(Despite evidence of success, the program was discontinued when federal funding dried up.)

Leff brought the idea for Umoja to Manley Principal Katherine Flanagan, who bought into the vision.

Through traditional youth development activities like discussion groups and tutoring, Umoja staff and mentors build relationships with Manley students who want to participate. These activities feed young people into career exploration, networking, summer jobs and college preparation, including college visits. "We're not only saying it. We're showing them a picture of college, career, community work, service," says Leff. "It's the whole picture."

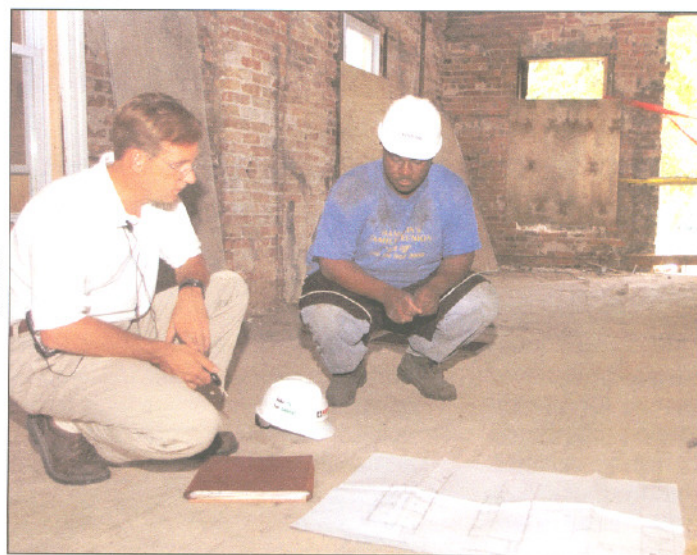
From the beginning, Umoja has worked closely with a school-within-a-school at Manley that is devoted to construction technology. "It was my goal to push carpentry, to get [students] into the trade school track," says Dimitroff, who arrived in the middle of Umoja's first house rehab in 1998.

A near disaster that year proved to be a blessing in disguise. A break-in resulted in the near destruction of the almost-completed house, which prompted The Enterprise Companies and its subcontractors to start what would become an ongoing partnership. They donated more than \$10,000 in materials and labor to repair the damage and complete the rehab. In 1999, the house was sold to a North Lawndale resident for \$75,000.

In 2001, Umoja and Enterprise began a second house rehab project. As with the first one, the Steans Family Foundation provided a \$45,000 loan to purchase the property, a one-story house on Taylor Street just west of California.

Enterprise brought in two architects from Pappageorge/Haymes Ltd., who worked with students from the construction tech small school to design the rehab, using the original blueprints. The students also surveyed neighborhood residents to find out what they wanted in a house. "We had to ax the swimming pool," jokes Carl Groesbeck, development manager for Enterprise.

The final plans took shape in July at a design workshop, or "charrette," at Pappageorge/Haymes offices. "It was real cool," says Ashley Banks, who served on the design team. "They combined a lot of stuff from all of us. When we came to the design charrette, it was exactly what we wanted, and all we had to do was give



JOHN DOZ

Foreman Johnathan Hayes, right, reviews blueprints with Carl Groesbeck of The Enterprise Companies, a developer that is partnering with Umoja to complete a house rehab project. Groesbeck uses his industry connections to help Umoja students get trade jobs.

them some suggestions."

Enterprise then brought in Kenney Construction Co., which is lending Umoja a superintendent and project managers.

Meanwhile, Dimitroff used his intimate knowledge of students to select the summer demolition crew. "I knew they wouldn't be supervised 100 percent of the time," he says. "I picked them on work ethic. I knew which kids would step up to the plate."

Groesbeck said he succeeded. "All the kids delivered."

This fall, students will put in a new foundation to expand the house another 350 to 400 square feet, erect walls and do preliminary work on plumbing, carpentry and the electrical system. They hope to complete the job in the spring. As many as 70 students are expected to take part in the rehab and groundskeeping around the area. When completed, the property will be sold to a North Lawndale resident for about \$85,000.

Project links into curriculum

Dimitroff says the overarching skills he wants to teach are logic, sequencing, application and problem solving. The rehab project, he says, feeds into this curriculum "like a baseball into a glove. It's the embodiment of everything I want to do." Though the math required of students is fairly basic, they need to use sound judgment to plan ahead and anticipate next steps. For example, students will have to estimate the quantity

and cost of materials.

Groesbeck says he wants to introduce subcontractors to students who might work with them. Currently, he is trying to find a sponsor for Doss to enter an apprenticeship program in tuckpointing. Meanwhile, Banks is applying to the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, New York University and the University of Michigan, and planning to major in architecture and civil engineering.

The rest of the summer crew members are also going on to college or planning to go after they graduate next June.

Umoja's relationships with students don't end at graduation. Mahon regularly calls graduates from the classes of 2000 through 2002, and has begun calling 2003 grads to see how they are doing. With the help of Umoja and Enterprise, Johnathan Hayes, a summer crew foreman who graduated from Manley in 2002, and is now self-employed, hopes to enter a program in occupational health and safety. "Now it's become this network. We work with a lot of students to help them get jobs, help with resumes," Mahon says.

Umoja itself is expanding its horizons. It is starting a second partnership at Gage Park High, and has trained teachers there on ways to improve advisory sessions, the school district's main strategy to build student-teacher relationships and provide postgraduate guidance. The nonprofit is also applying to run a charter school.

Umoja's Leff says changing high school culture is the key to improving advisory. "Schools don't know how to be student centered and look at kids as whole people," she says.