



Mary Schmich

For some, hard work can be true blessing

Work is a gift. Many of us think of work as a right or a burden, but Jonathan Hayes knows that to get your union card, a union job and a union turkey the week before Christmas is better than any Best Buy gizmo Santa could deliver.

Hayes, who's 23, lives in North Lawndale, a West Side neighborhood where "job market" too often means "drug trade" and too many young men wind up in jail or dead. It's the neighborhood where last week I met him and his friend Larry Doss, 21, as they put finishing touches on the house that helped get them a life.

"The kitchen is an addition," said Hayes, a burly guy wearing paint-splattered jeans, work boots, a Bears cap and one sparkly earring. His shier friend Larry, dressed all in black, stood nearby, smiling.

"It's got cherry floors," said Hayes, "all GE appliances, granite countertops, even a garbage disposal."

Until recently, this airy three-bedroom home across from the railroad tracks was just another abandoned eyesore infested with cobwebs and garbage. Then it was taken over by the Umoja Student Development Corporation, a program that originated at nearby Manley High School.

Umoja is built on the belief that one way to help students do well in school is to teach them to be productive outside of it. The program teaches kids to rehab houses that are sold at a low price to someone in the neighborhood.

Hayes and Doss started working for Umoja as students.

"It came as a challenge to me just to be average in school," said Hayes, who grew up as one of 11 kids raised by a single mother.

"Without Umoja," said Doss, "I'd just be in the house."

Through Umoja, they learned to build things. Tool boxes. Tissue boxes. Napkin holders. Then walls, floors, roofs—and relationships with helpful people.

When Doss, who has learning disabilities, was failing in school, Umoja found him tutors.

When Hayes' favorite cousin was killed—a drug dealer who bought him fancy shoes as a reward for OK grades—Hayes got a gun. When he went to jail for possession of a loaded weapon, Umoja helped him get out.

Even so, Hayes and Doss might have been set adrift after graduation if it hadn't been for this old brick railroad flat. Umoja hired them as foremen to supervise the 100 Manley students on the rehab. They worked with contractors who admired their skill and will—and who recommended them to the Laborers' Union, which is hardly teeming with young African-Americans.

"Some bosses will hold on to you and sweatshop you," said Hayes. "Our boss wanted to see us make the bigger money, take care of our families."

One boss was Carl Groesbeck of The Enterprise Companies, a developer that works with Umoja.

"A lot of the people who go into the trades get handed down the opportunity," he said. "Hard work, yes, but also grandfather to father to son. That tradition is not there for everybody."

Hayes and Doss learned how to run the Umoja project like a union job site. Show up on time. Take breaks only on the breaks.

"I had to let go of a couple of buddies because of them taking kindness for weakness or thinking it couldn't happen to them," said Hayes. "I couldn't lollygag because this was the best opportunity I've ever been presented."

Doss planned on giving his union turkey to his grandma. Hayes was going to cook his for his 3-year-old son.

"He's the prettiest thing," said Hayes. He gazed at the cherry floor of the house he helped to build. "Growing up, I wondered how I could afford to pack a lunch for a field trip. My son won't have to worry."

Meanwhile, Lila Leff, the effervescent New Yorker who created Umoja, gets tearful when she thinks of what it took for these men to get the chance of employment beyond odd jobs.

The courses flunked. The lure of drugs. Jail. So many perilous junctions that turned into what she calls "miracle moments" and culminated in the miracle of a union card.

"This is truly a miracle holiday story," she said. "But it shouldn't be. This should happen every Tuesday."

'Without Umoja, I'd just be in the house.'

—Larry Doss, 21, Laborers' Union worker