



Taking a New Path Through STEP to Construction

By Louise Brown -- April 2019

It's only 7:45 a.m. but Max has been at work for almost an hour, and he's sweating. A lot of the pipes he and the plumber have to lift as they replace the giant "chiller" can be heavy, and no wonder. This mechanical beast of steel – eight feet tall, with pipes as heavy as 350 pounds radiating out like octopus arms – is what cools the air at North Kipling Junior Middle School near Finch Ave. Licensed

plumber Seth Lefaive and his young apprentice Max Saraikine have been at this job for weeks, breaking down the old chiller, hauling it away, and building a new one from scratch. They cut pipes to fit using what Max calls “crazy” amounts of math, and heave them up ladders to put in place.

Both mentally and physically, this is harder work than Max ever imagined.

And he loves every minute.

The 19-year-old, who one year ago was barely showing up at John Polanyi Collegiate Institute and was so bored he was starting to get in trouble with the law, is a man reborn – with a purpose. Through taking an unusual Toronto District School Board co-op program last term that offers a taste of several construction trades, the teen with the gravel voice says he found his calling. He plans to be a plumber; a career he says will pay him well and feed his soul.

“This is what I was meant for. It’s like playing with big LEGO pieces – but more interesting. It’s where I belong,” grins Max, who proved so impressive on the job site during his 14-week co-op stint over the winter, the plumbing company he trained with hired him as an apprentice right out of school.

The co-op program, called STEP to Construction, lets Grade 11/12 students spend a semester on a job site sampling several skilled trades – from electrical to carpentry, drywall to sheet metal work, plumbing, tile-setting, bricklaying, cement finishing and general labour and construction craft work – to see if one sparks their interest. STEP stands for Specialized Trades Exploration Program, because it lets students explore from three to seven of these trades over a semester, rather than just one. It also sends them to George Brown College once a week for a dual credit (college credit + high school credit) in Construction Health and Safety, where they also earn a fistful of safety certificates to beef up their resumes, free of charge. STEP grads end up with five high school credits and a college credit to boot.

It's a powerful way to make education more equitable, particularly for students who may not click with the traditional academic path, notes Ron Felsen, the TDSB's Principal of Experiential Learning.

“For some kids who haven't found their place in the school system, who have struggled with school, with their grades, with attendance, on whom some teachers had given up, they're now starting on a path to a career,” says Felsen, who is also piloting a STEP program with the TTC in transportation trades, and in the hospitality industry, both of whom face labour shortages.



“It shows that with the right supports, a student can succeed. They may be late for their bricks-and-mortar classroom, but on a job site, they’re on time at 6 a.m.”

Teens who have been led to believe they’re “bad students” at a desk may just be different kinds of learners who need help finding other kinds of work, says Elvy Moro, the co-op teacher at Northview Secondary School who created the program 14 years ago and now oversees STEP to Construction.

“Are they ‘bad students’ if they learn by seeing, or by doing? They may just need help identifying what they could be good at. The STEP program shows kids what other options are out there,” says Moro. “People need to recognize skilled trades as a first choice, not a fallback.”

Guidance counsellors sometimes forget to suggest the trades, he says, or a student will consider a trade, only to have parents veto it. One Grade 8 parent asked Felsen not to include a slide about the advantages of the skilled trades in a presentation on career paths, in case it distracted students from aiming for university.

This narrow focus on college and university needs to change, says Felsen.

In fact, STEP can provide valuable experience to keen A-students, explains Ian Da Silva, a TDSB teacher centrally assigned to the STEP program. Some enjoy the hands-on work itself, while others have gone to STEP first before pursuing architecture or engineering, so they’ll have a better feel for what’s involved in building what they will design.

“People need to change their view of the trades as something that doesn’t take intelligence. The skilled trades involve problem-solving and continuous learning; it’s not just repetition – it takes balanced

intelligence, and the satisfaction is there,” he says. “Every parent wants their child to find work that engages them, and there’s a lot of design and creativity involved in the trades. It can also be entrepreneurial, and students interested in management can go into construction management.”

A recent survey of 417 construction workers in the GTA shows three-quarters of them rate their job satisfaction as “comfortable and fulfilled,” compared to less than half of Canadian workers in general. The survey, by Job Talks, a recruitment research firm supported by the Residential Construction Council of Ontario, also notes construction workers have been found to have a healthy work-life balance, have the satisfaction of seeing the results of their labour, are less stressed about work or anxious about the future because they have job security.

And there’s a public responsibility that comes with construction trades, adds Da Silva. “You can make people sick if a water system isn’t clean, or if gas pipes blow up. You have to know what you’re doing.”

Beyond its value to students themselves, STEP to Construction is being seen by many developers as a way to start tackling the labour shortage. Ontario is expected to need 100,000 more construction workers over the next decade, and a growing number of companies see STEP as an early recruitment tool that’s “part of the solution,”

says Moro. More companies are signing on to the program; this year, STEP was able to take on more than 40 students a semester – twice as many as in previous years, and the TDSB is still looking for more partners. With baby boomers retiring from construction and more cranes filling the skyline, industry leaders are clamoring for more apprentices.

Max tried the STEP program this winter on the advice of a friend, and was placed at a high-rise going up near Yonge and Davisville. He tried his hand at a number of trades, including plumbing, where Lefaive of Masen Mechanical took him under his wing.



“Right from the start, I could tell Max had the right mindset for this work; he wasn’t afraid of being on a job site and wanted to get right in there and do things, so I spoke to my company about hiring him,” says Lefaive. The program has transformed Max’s life. He’s already working 39 hours a week for \$20 an hour, and after three months, he gets benefits. He must put in 1,800 hours of work a year for five years, and spend two months each year in class training, before achieving his dream of becoming a licensed, journeyman plumber.

The guy who couldn’t get to school for 9 a.m. now get up at 5 a.m. to be at work for 7 – and he’s usually 15 minutes early.

The student who wouldn’t do his math homework now uses math at work every day.

The teen with a school rap sheet for skipping class began texting his teachers at night about cool things he was learning.

“In four months, I saw Max go from a kid who was just walking around high school like many kids do – not seeing himself as a learner – to the nerd at the head of the class, the top student, texting me in the middle of the night to say, ‘This is what I learned today!’” recalls Rahim Essabhai, a co-op teacher at John Polanyi.

“This program gives a shot to kids whose ‘attendance profile’ can be two to three pages long, and transforms them into the people we want to leave our earth to. It’s magical.”

Max isn’t the only teen who was academically adrift until finding his niche through STEP to Construction. Of the 500-plus students who have gone through the program since it began, many speak about it with evangelical excitement.

“I feel like it shaped me to become a man; it’s a phenomenal program,” raves Kyjuan, one of several students who spoke to industry representatives recently at a meeting of the program’s advisory committee. As a student at York Mills Collegiate last fall, he admits: “I would always skip class and drive around with my friends. But I was only three credits away from graduating and I wanted to make my mom happy, so I tried STEP and did two weeks in each of all sorts of trades – installing electrical outlets, metal sub-framing, finish carpentry. I never once skipped out or complained about being cold or hungry.”

Guidance counsellor Tina Zappone says she’s proud of Kyjuan: “He used to be a Hall Wanderer; now he recruits other students to join the STEP program!” Kyjuan now works in a paid training program sponsored by a non-profit construction contractor called Building Up.

The STEP advisory committee to which he was telling his story includes sponsors like Stanley Tools, which donates a tool kit to each student, and the construction union locals that provide STEP with everything from hard hats to training and financial support. A long list of developers also take part in the program, including Mattamy Homes, Daniels, Menkes, Remington, Greenpark, AspenRidge, Empire, Buttcon, Accel, Tribute, Fram, Lash, Tucker HiRise, Minto, SKYGRiD, Deltera and TMG Builders, as well as several industry associations.



Elvy Moro admits not every STEP participant finds his passion on a job site, and some can't take the rigour of the work. But others embrace it, and their testimonials to the advisory committee that day were a virtual commercial for the program:

- “Taking STEP was the greatest choice I’ve made in my life; I’m growing as a person and I’m right where I belong,” says Devonte, who discovered he liked sheet metal work during his STEP placement with Deltera last semester, and has since been hired by a sheet metal company. “Growing up, I didn’t like sitting down; I liked building things. It was honestly an amazing chance to get to go on site and try things. You have to get up early, and go to bed early, but I love it. I can see myself improving as a person.”
- That sentiment was echoed by Aleks, a student at Lawrence Park Collegiate. “I wasn’t really motivated to be at school. But when I got working on a condo site near Yorkville (with TMG Builders), I got up at 5:45 to be on the job at 6:45. You see everything; plumbing, HVAC, electrical, bricklaying, how to cut a pipe, set up pipes, install the main ventilation system and fire dampers...” Aleks got hooked, and has applied to community college this fall for Building and Renovation Techniques.
- Sharron Rosen is a school principal who says her son Jonah never really saw the relevance of school until he did the STEP to Construction co-op at a Tucker HiRise site. He’s now in a pre-apprenticeship program at George Brown to become an electrician. “This program raised the bar for my son, and it’s something we should value if we truly believe in

setting high expectations for all students. Before, schools didn't seem to value Jonah as a learner; he always wanted something hands-on. So he had goals but he never had a path. This program set him up for success. It was an opportunity for him to find purpose," says his mother. "After getting up early and learning those life skills, he has a whole different demeanor. For the first time, he seems happy. He's smiling, he's talking about the future. He's changed his narrative – and hey, when our vacuum cleaner broke, he fixed it!"

Ian Da Silva and Elvy Moro say they love watching these personal turnarounds, and wish people wouldn't discount the trades as an inferior career path for those who can't cut it academically.

"This program shows there are different formal career paths," said Da Silva. "We're not discounting one pathway over another, whether it's university or college or the trades, but we are saying, let's elevate the discussion about career paths. It's not either/or, and the trades are a path with a lot to offer.

"Let's honour students' wishes when they want to consider the trades. And let's help students find the job that's really right for them."

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