

**‘Helped me become somebody’**

**YouthBuild graduates honored at ceremony, look toward future**

**YOUTH BUILD**

**By Cameron Morsberger**

*cmorsberger@lowellsun.com*

**LOWELL >> “ Youth what?” “ YouthBuild!”**

Future carpenters, welders, chefs, restaurateurs, hotel managers and more joined in chants and cheers with family and friends at Shedd Park Friday afternoon, when they officially graduated from Community Teamwork’s 10-month-long YouthBuild program.

A total of 50 graduates — from February 2021 through March 2022 — donned caps and gowns to commemorate the occasion and receive their formal certification in either carpentry or culinary arts and hospitality.

Designed for 16- to 24-yearolds who do not follow the tra-

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Graduation celebration at Shedd Park for YouthBuild students from the Construction Track and Culinary Track on Thursday. Graduates and twins Joshua, left, and Joel Calcano, 18, and their mother Ana Diaz, all of Lowell.

JULIA MALAKIE PHOTOS / LOWELL SUN



Graduate Jovan Kong with, from left, his aunt Ciara Noel, grandmother Rosa Santiago, and mother Jasmine Rosa. All are from Lowell.

**YouthBuild**

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ditional high school path, YouthBuild offers academic courses, case management and hands- on learning for students, who end the program with several different certifications in their chosen field, including OSHA10 and the ServSafe Food Protection Manager Certification for culinary students. In her more than 10 years on the job, Siobhan Sheehan, the YouthBuild program manager, said she is continually proud at how her students rise to the challenge and successfully walk the graduation stage. Students not only leave with

After spending about 10 months with construction crews, building homes and facilities across Lowell, Molina is now a professional welder at JR’s Welding in Haverhill.

Without YouthBuild’s mentorship and workforce training, he said he wouldn’t be where he is today.

“ They actually helped me to become a better man. They helped me become somebody,” Molina said. “ Doing the program transformed my life.”

McKayla Silva, 16, of Lowell held her 2-year- old daughter Emilia as she walked to accept her construction certificate on Friday. After

strong trade and life skills, Sheehan said, but they also are “breaking the cycle of poverty” by pursuing education.

“These young guys and girls are amazing. They come to us with the want to change,” Sheehan said. “They leave here successful and proud with self-esteem and leadership, and they become go-getters. It’s life-changing for them and their families.”

After short opening remarks from Construction Trainer Rafael Cotto, graduate Angie Ayala spoke on behalf of her former classmate Christian Ironfield, who died in November of last year. A cap and gown, alongside a poster with a drawing of Ironfield’s face, was placed beside the graduates.

Community Teamwork CEO Karen Frederick, as well as state Rep. Vanna Howard and City Councilors Corey Robinson and John Drinkwater, were in attendance.

Student speaker James Camara, originally from Springfield, spoke about how he fell behind in school and felt unmotivated when the pandemic hit. He “gave up” on high school and struggled with virtual class, eventually dropping out. YouthBuild turned him around, he said, thanking staff for “breaking down those doors that we couldn’t seem to break down ourselves.”

“We all have gone through so much in such a short amount of time, and I’d just like to say that I’m proud of you all,” Camara said to his classmates. “We started here as lost souls, not sure where the future would take us, and now a good majority of us are set with a promising internship and the Hi-SET that would give us our high school diplomas.”

Construction students recently erected a duplex behind the Lowell Senior Center, built to accommodate low-income families. That hands-on experience allowed them to learn about siding, framing, installing cabinets and flooring while giving back to their community, Sheehan said. They worked alongside Habitat for Humanity of Greater Lowell on projects across the area.

On the culinary track, students cooked full weekly meals for St. Paul’s Soup Kitchen, which serves more than 100 people each night, and kids in the Lowell Youth Leadership Program.

Community service is a major part of YouthBuild, Sheehan said — construction students and culinary arts students must complete a minimum of 675 and 450 volunteer hours, respectively. Many students also receive the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award for that service, meaning they are able to attend Middlesex Community College, UMass Lowell or another university with further support.

Jose Molina, 26, of Lowell, was honored with the Excellence in Construction award during the ceremony.

completing the program, Silva said she hopes to move to Texas and enter the real estate industry. “I wanted to get an early start with my career and I wanted to graduate early and get a better chance at success,” Silva said. “They taught me a lot of people skills, taught me what a real family is.”

In the 12 months following graduation, Sheehan said YouthBuild continues to support alumni with routine check-ins, resume reviews, interview preparation and more.

The goal is for graduates to become young professionals, and the program works to make that a reality, Sheehan said.

“Whether it’s fuel systems for them and their family, maybe it’s rental assistance, maybe it’s housing and homeless, we’re able to lean back and provide services to not only the student, but to their whole families,” she said. “Once you’re a YouthBuilder, you’re always a YouthBuilder.”



Graduate Leishla Ortega, left, dances with her friend Dezaria Kong (sister of Jovan Kong in other photo). Both are from Lowell. To the left, from left, Brianna Bourassa of Hyannis, and Anthony [didn’t want to give last name] of Lowell, and Bourassa’s mother Carol Bourassal of Lowell.

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