

YouthBuild program teaches students educational and vocational skills

By Molly Smith
The Durham VOICE

O'Morris Jones and Jeremiah Lewis may only be 17 and 18 years old, but their plans for the future reach far beyond their ages.

The two young men recently entered the Triangle Literacy Council's new Bull City YouthBuild program, which provides participants with a nine-month, intensive learning environment to receive their high school equivalency and hands-on job experience in construction. Lewis and Jones have high hopes for the program so far.

"One, it's a good opportunity," Lewis said. "Two, I love using my hands. Three, I had to drop out of high school and (YouthBuild) helps me finish. It's just the start of a good future."

Jones said YouthBuild employs instructors in math, science, social studies, language arts and other school subjects to teach students Monday through Thursday. When they aren't studying the basics, Lewis and Jones are working with hammers and saws through a partnership with Durham Habitat for Humanity.

"So far, learning how to read the tape measure has been so helpful," Lewis said. "I mean, I could read it before, but now it actually makes sense."

He said while taking construction safety classes, the students began working on a shelf for a storage container. They are now building the foundation for a house,

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Jeremiah Lewis

and by the end of the program, the house should be finished.

"I think construction will be a big help," Jones said. "So when you want to build your own house later in life, you already know how to do everything."

Jones plans to do more than just build his own house in the future. After his completion of the program, he hopes to



Jones (left) and Lewis are students at YouthBuild who hope to put the skills and lessons they learn in the program to use in their future careers. (Staff photo by Molly Smith)

attend North Carolina Central University to study law. Since Jones dropped out of high school, YouthBuild has provided him with a better environment to earn his high school equivalency.

"I don't want to say I wasn't doing good in school, but as far as coming to school and not fighting, this is better for me," he said. "I got suspended a lot."

Lewis said YouthBuild provides him with a sense of stability. He lived in Georgia, Florida and New York before coming to North Carolina. He enjoys the construction work and hopes to incorporate it into his future career.

"I really want to join the Navy and become a mechanical engineer," he said.

Deborah Murphy, YouthBuild's manager, said the program's classes are taught by a variety of instructors, making the project a group effort.

The TLC YouthBuild team strives to

meet a number of preliminary goals.

According to the organization's website, the staff aims to help 65 percent of the students improve their literacy and numeracy and place 70 percent of the students in post-secondary education or employment.

"If I'm dreaming and if dreams were to come true, I hope that every single one of them will gain great educational and vocational skills," Murphy said.

Jones and Lewis have the bonus of finding a best friend in each other after meeting only a month ago. In their free time, they play basketball with friends and cook for their families at home.

"Not only are you physically building a house, but YouthBuild helps you build yourself and gets you away from gang violence," Lewis said. "I would say that it's almost like a realistic Narnia."