

\$100,000 collected for ACE Mentor Program



Charles Thornton, founder of the ACE Mentor Program of America, speaks at a fundraising luncheon for Portland's ACE Mentor Program this week. (Courtesy of ACE Mentor Program)

A fundraising luncheon held by the ACE Mentor Program of Oregon on Wednesday produced more than \$100,000 for scholarships for high school students planning to enter the architecture, construction or engineering fields.

ACE Mentor Program of America was started in New York City in 1993 by structural engineer Charles Thornton, who was the keynote speaker at Wednesday's event in Portland. The program has since offered guidance and training in architecture, construction and engineering to more than 40,000 high school students in about 100 cities.

Before Thornton spoke, several mentors and their student mentees told their stories, including Luis Soto Nampula of Parkrose High and his teacher Ally Packer. Nampula, who plans to major in electrical engineering, said he never would have had the courage to

speak in public without learning how via participation in the ACE Mentor Program.

As Nampula talked about how the program helped him discover his love of engineering, he charmed the crowd with his easy demeanor and even drew a few laughs.

"If it was up to engineers, all buildings would be boxes," he said.

The ACE Mentor Program of Oregon was started in 2006, according to its executive director, Kevin Jeans Gail. Today the local chapter relies on more than 40 professional firms to provide mentors for students from 41 high schools. To date, it has awarded about \$312,000 in scholarships.

Between 35 and 40 high school seniors have applied this year for scholarships that range between \$4,000 and \$6,000, Gail said. Along with the scholarships comes the understanding that winners will major in one of the ACE Mentor Program fields, he said.

"We will have at least 12 or 14 scholarships," he said the day after the luncheon. "And between 35 and 40 percent (of applicants) have a shot at a scholarship."

Thornton, during his address, told the audience of about 500 at the Portland Art Museum that students' involvement in the program often helps them not only get jobs, but also often leads to them becoming mentors themselves.

Thornton gave a brief history of why the ACE Mentor Program was started: to help widen the entrance to the engineering school at his alma mater, Manhattan College in New York City.

"Remember after the Berlin Wall came down (in 1989) and, believe it or not, defense budgets were cut," he said. "My alma mater was thinking of closing its engineering school."

The school served only white males until the 1970s, Thornton said, and he and a few colleagues from the school were determined to increase enrollment by attract a more diverse student body, including girls and minorities.

Thornton "lucked up," he said, when he learned that the New York City School Construction Authority had 350 summer interns. He hired eight of them at minimum wage, he said, to serve as the ACE Mentor Program's first trial group.

“We knew if we had them scrubbing floors, they wouldn’t come back,” he said. “So we had them doing marketing, business development, engineering and doing shop drawings.”

But the organization really got going when the New Jersey Port Authority (now the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey) came on board, Thornton said, and strongly encouraged its many contractors to connect with ACE.

“You have to have owners involved,” he said.

At the end of the luncheon, before Thornton noticed that Nampula was waiting patiently in line to meet him, the speaker pointed him out as a success story.

“I guarantee that if we put him up there before ACE, he would not have done so well – but he learned how to speak,” Thornton said. “It’s not about teaching kids how to do engineering as much as it is about teaching teamwork and collaboration. That’s the key.”

While the two finally met, Nampula’s teacher gave a similar assessment of how the ACE program helped her student.

“It’s given him a kind of vision for what his career might look like,” Packer said. “He had the opportunity to work with engineers and architects and understand, ‘this is what I’m going to do.’

“I think it encouraged him and solidified his dream and I think he’s very sure now, even more than before. And his confidence is really better.”

More about the ACE Mentor program of Oregon is available [online](#).