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ACE mentors, builds future architecture, construction, engineering workforce

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PHOTOS | CONTRIBUTED

(Left) In 2018, the ACE Mentor Program of Connecticut (ACE CT) awarded 20 scholarships totaling \$26,000. Since its inception, ACE CT has granted \$520,000 in scholarships to students pursuing a college degree in architecture, engineering, construction management or a related field. (Right) ACE students participate in a chapter-wide competition between its Hartford teams. Thirty-seven students from four chapters gathered together at Tecton Architects to focus on electrical engineering.

Nonprofit of the Year — Winner: ACE Mentor Program of Connecticut

With 20 years under its belt, the ACE Mentor Program of Connecticut tackles worker shortages in the architecture, construction and engineering industries by connecting professional mentors and students.

So says ACE Board of Directors President Maria Loitz, who is director of marketing and associate principal at Bloomfield engineering firm BVH Integrated Services. She has led the nonprofit for 16 years after joining in 2001. The group has five employees who are mentors, and seeks out volunteers as well.

"ACE recruits students from the cities because we feel those are the populations that are underrepresented in our industry, but the program is open to anybody," Loitz said. To find mentors, "we reach out all the time through networking and work with industry associations like the American Institute of Architects and the Construction Institute at the University of Hartford."

One of the first affiliates to form in 1998 after the national organization debuted in 1994, ACE Connecticut celebrated its 20th anniversary this past September.

As it is organized now, ACE Connecticut provides mentoring programs throughout the school year, matching teams of professional mentors with public and private high school students in the architectural, construction and engineering fields in four cities — Hartford (which includes Middletown and Enfield), New Britain, Bridgeport and New Haven.

For each location, teams of mentors meet with students from fall through April. Students get hands-on training in such practices as computer-aided design and bridge-building, finish with a presentation, and receive certificates of completion. Soft skills covered include teamwork, problem-solving and decision-making.

"Our focus is to get high school students interested in architecture, construction and engineering," Loitz said.

"Sometimes we have students come in pretty sure they want to be an architect and then they work in the program and decide they want to be a structural engineer instead."

Across Connecticut, approximately 150 students from 30 high schools around the state participate each year in the mentoring program. In the 2017-18 school year, 80 different mentors from 40 different design and construction companies worked with those students, Loitz said.

The Connecticut affiliate has awarded more than \$520,000 in scholarships since its inception to students pursuing a college degree in ACE fields, she added.

Today, Loitz is guiding the nonprofit's growth — primarily in planning to replicate a unique program model now used in New Britain.

That model may spread to Bristol, Stamford or Springfield, Mass., where Massachusetts' Boston programming does not reach, Loitz said.

New Britain's seven-year-old program is unique because it partners with Central Connecticut State University and the local Boys and Girls Club. The club helps transport students to mentoring sessions it hosts and to site visits with mentor companies. CCSU helps entice students to pursue college degrees — at their university and other colleges, said Thomas Menditto, CCSU's educational coordinator for the office of TRIO programs.

TRIO is a mix of federally funded free college access programs for New Britain students. TRIO recruits high school students for the New Britain ACE program, Menditto said.

In a given year, 15 to 20 students participate with ACE mentors in New Britain, he said.

"It's making a difference and it's going to make a difference to the future workforce and the lives of these students," said Menditto.

Mentee becomes mentor

Mentee Emily Ruggeri, 26, of Milford, is now a mentor in the Bridgeport program.

Ruggeri participated in the New Haven program when she was a senior at Luralton Hall, an all-girls Catholic high school. Her mentor was Jennifer Lin of Turner Construction, a New York City-based company with a Shelton office.

"I took (Lin's) business card and ended up seeing the company at a career fair at my school and got a job there," Ruggeri recalled.

Today, Lin supervises Ruggeri, who is an engineer at Turner. Eager to make a similar impact, Ruggeri in turn helps mentor a group of 30 students in Bridgeport.

"Obviously, I know the benefit, so I hope when I mentor, the students can feel a little more guided," she said.

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