



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact: Caroline Fox
Whitney Edwards Design
410-822-8335
caroline@wedesign.com

Daniel Bowen (RIGHT) and ACE students Safi Siddiqui and Michael Cory display their proposal for the renovation of the old Lowe's building.

Young mentors driving force behind ACE

EASTON, MD—Daniel Bowen, a project engineer at Willow Construction, knows what it's like to sit in class. In fact, he hasn't been out of school much longer than the students he mentors.

A graduate of St. Michaels High School, Bowen is one of the youngest professionals in the ACE Mentor Program, an after-school program that gives hands-on instruction and introduces architecture, construction, and engineering to high school students. Bowen and Willow Construction volunteer his time once a week during the school year to work with local high school students and teach them about the construction industry. "I like being able to put Willow in front of the community...to share learning experiences and to see what is out there, talent-wise, in the county" Bowen says.

ACE is mutually beneficial for both construction companies and students. Companies like Willow Construction get to ensure the availability of future employees, while students get to expose themselves to possible internships and part- or full-time employers. Other area companies that volunteer their time include Whiting-Turner, Barton Malow, and Easton Utilities.

Each week, Bowen meets with his team of students to work on a school-year-long community project. Students start the year by brainstorming proposal ideas under the guidance of their mentors. Once they decide on their project, students experience the construction process from start to finish. "Construction isn't all hammers and nails. It's scheduling, teamwork, and communication. It's very business-oriented" Bowen says.

The mentors also act as if they were the conceptual project's financial backers. "[Last year] we did the Lowe's building and the renovations for an activity park, and I would have been the CFO," Bowen explains. Acting as the financial resource behind the project means that Bowen has to periodically tell students that their ideas aren't feasible, but even during brainstorming the high school students kept their creativity in check. "Some of the ideas during brainstorming were kind of comical" he admits, but he was surprised by the students' ability to realistically come up with proposals.

With the guidance of specialized mentors, each student assumes the role of a real-world construction team member, ranging from project executives to interior designers. Games, field trips, and lesson plans explain the different roles and aspects of the construction process as the students plan and build a 3D model of their proposed project.

Bowen admits that being an ACE mentor can be challenging. "[It's hard] getting students to step up and take initiative, because they are scared and don't know what to do," he says. "It is also hard helping students understand deadlines," he admits. The reward of working with the students in what Bowen describes as a "refreshing" atmosphere outweighs any challenges, and "knowing that someone definitely put the time in for me and being able to give back" keeps him involved.

Every spring, students present their final plans and building models at a scholarship breakfast. Each team of students must explain their project to community members, other teams, and parents. In addition to receiving ACE Eastern Shore scholarships, eligible students can go on to compete for ACE National and other college scholarships.

Bowen stresses that ACE doesn't just teach students about the construction industry. Students who participate in the ACE program develop their skills in drawing, writing, presenting, and problem solving. "It can be hard for students to become a member of a group—it's hard to mesh sometimes...ACE helps them develop good communication, good rapport, with the other students," while interacting with members of the community. "It definitely made them more aware of how they can affect and improve the community," Bowen says, "and [ACE] opens windows to peer mentors and networking," helping students along their career paths.

"I hope that the rest of the community will follow Willow Construction and be very open-minded and hands on in ACE and other school activities," Bowen says. He explains that because of the current economic situation, ACE has had a difficult time pulling new volunteers. "You can only advance a program with interaction from the community. People have to acknowledge it's there."

For more information on the ACE program or how to become involved, contact Jack Dempsey at 410-924-6242 or visit www.acementor.org.

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