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Building lives: Projects rehab more than homes

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Denton Naylor connects a fluid pump to an expansion tank while installing a hot water solar system in the basement of a home under construction Thursday in Milwaukee. (Staff photos by Kevin Harnack)

[By James Briggs](#)

Denton Naylor isn't content to stand back and watch.

When work needed to be done, Naylor, 22, of Milwaukee stepped up Thursday and connected a fluid pump to an expansion tank as part of a hot water solar system installation at a south side house.

Naylor, along with several other young people from troubled Milwaukee neighborhoods, installed a solar panel as part of the [Milwaukee Community Service Corps](#), a nonprofit organization that partners with the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee on rehabilitation projects. The program trains about 100 people a year, paying them to perform construction work for 40 hours a week.

Naylor still is new to the construction trade, he said, or, for that matter, any trade that doesn't involve guns or drugs. But with sweat beading on his forehead and dreadlocks flowing from his hardhat, Naylor said the service corps had afforded him the opportunity to turn from Milwaukee's streets and never look back.

"If I wouldn't have found nothing I liked, I'd probably be out there doing the same thing," he said. "There was no point in my life when I'm like, 'Nah, I'm gonna give this up.' I liked it. I loved it until I found something else that outweighed it.

"Most of that is due to the credibility I get from this. It's legal. I don't have to look over my shoulders every day. I don't have to hear my mom cussing me out about it. I have two beautiful girls, a 5-year-old and a 1-year-old, and that's not the life that I'd like to live for them."



John Price (left) of Access Solar LLC, Waukesha, works with Anthony Harris while installing a hot water solar array on the roof of a home under construction Thursday in Milwaukee. Several young adults from the Milwaukee Community Service Corps received training that promotes the use of renewable technologies.

John Price, owner of Waukesha-based Access Solar LLC, managed Thursday's solar installation and said he saw Naylor and his crewmates not only as examples to others in their situation, but also to any young person still searching for a career path.

"I'm getting too old and fat to crawl around here," Price said. "I've been doing construction work for 30 years. I'm ready to pass it on to the next generation."

With money from We Energies Corp. and the U.S. Department of Labor, the Community Service Corps is a bridge to apprenticeship for 15- to 23-year-old workers, many of whom have dropped out of high school, had troubles with the law or live in impoverished conditions.

Naylor, for instance, said he had no interest in going to work until a public defender urged him to consider the program as part of a probation requirement.

"At first, the check kept me here," he said. "I started getting a little more serious as time went on. I found a liking for carpentry."

Naylor since has been promoted to a team supervisor, exactly the kind of trajectory the Community Service Corps targets, said Chris Litzau, the program's executive director.

"Whether it's solar hot water or plumbing or sheet metal work ... these young people are getting opportunities we wish we had," he said.

The service corps even can turn some workers toward construction from other career paths.

Anthony Harris, 23, said he was pursuing business management at Milwaukee Area Technical College, but was considering a switch toward a career in solar installations.

"I like to install," he said, "because I like to get my hands dirty."

In most other ways, though, the service corps provides motivation for workers to stay clean while learning new trades.

Naylor said he no longer feels tempted to hang with the same crowds he once did in the north side neighborhood where he lives.

"I ride past those guys every day and I blow my horn and I keep going 'cause I know, once I stop, I might go back to it," he said. "But this is what I love, so I can't do that no more, you know?"

"I've had too many opportunities to pass up. You got to be a fool not to take one of them."