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Building Bright Futures with the ACE Mentor Program

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By Mickey Brandt, SNJ Today Reporter

MILLVILLE, N.J. - *The ACE Mentor Program aims to reverse local 'brain drain' by engaging creative students with professionals.*

More than two dozen local high school students are designing and constructing their possible futures every Wednesday evening at the Cumberland County Arts & Innovation Center in Millville under the precise and enthusiastic guidance of volunteer mentors of the ACE Mentor Program of America. ACE is the acronym for Architecture, Construction, and Engineering and the mentors for the Cumberland County Team are professionals in those fields. It's an extracurricular activity with participants from six area high schools.

Students get exposure to these industries through hands-on experience in design and construction, and in-person lectures from experts in everything from landscape architecture to civil engineering.



They also qualify for scholarships offered by an umbrella organization, ACE New Jersey. Since 2000, it has awarded more than \$400,000 to 288 graduates of the program statewide. In Cumberland County last year, five ACE seniors received a total of \$7,500 and in the prior year, five students won \$10,500 in aid.

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(Top: Larry Merighi helps students with their ACE project.)

At a recent meeting, the trainees were tasked with designing a retreat for an artist. Larry Merighi, Cumberland team leader and a founding partner of Manders Merighi Portadin Farrell Architects in Vineland, led the project. After a perfunctory welcome, he wasted no time outlining the evening's work and then moved around the room with four other mentors answering questions and making suggestions.

"I try to get to everyone," he said. "But they're all self-motivated creators, they manage."

The participants are often recommended for ACE by high school technology and engineering teachers. Some hear of the activity from a friend and sign up. Enrollment is limited so personal attention is maximized. Some teachers like Vineland High's Phil Giambri and active alumni like Temple University student Eduardo Almaraz Beltran informally join the meetings to help and encourage.

After college graduation, some former participants go into an ACE profession and some pursue their careers here in the region.

"We don't get a lot of attention, but ACE is a great program and helps reverse the 'brain drain' from our area," Merighi said.

Mentor Yazmin Moreno discovered her interest in architecture as a member of ACE and now works for Manders Merighi. She consistently said things in the small groups at the meeting like "Come here; you look excited; what's your idea?"

Beth Kraus, a 15-year-old sophomore at Vineland High School is excited. This is her first year in ACE.

"I really wasn't sure at first," she said. "But now I can't wait every week. ACE really shows me what I could do for a living and really gets my brain working."

Kraus' goal is to be an aerospace engineer for NASA.

Shane McCarron, 17 and a Millville High School junior, came to ACE this year through his school's Robotics Club.

"I'm excited I got recommended for ACE and got into it," he said. "I like it and will stick with it."

McCarron will probably attend Rowan University and become a mechanical engineer.

Brianna File also attends Millville High and is enjoying her second year in ACE.



"I'm not sure what my college major will be yet," she said. "But after doing ACE I do want to have a career or at least a minor in architecture or engineering."

(Top Right: Brianna File and Hailey Holmes work on their tower project at the Cumberland County Arts & Innovation Center in Millville.)

The 17-year-old senior encouraged all high schoolers to consider ACE and not be intimidated by not having a design background.

"It's about learning, not already knowing," File said. "Don't be afraid; take the risk and it's not that scary once you start."

The mentors may garner as much satisfaction as their protégés.

"I love this, said mentor Matt Fralinger of Fralinger Engineering in Bridgeton. "We stress problem-solving in groups. You're presented with a problem and see where it might take you."

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All ACE groups reach out to many kinds of students.

"As professionals, we recognize the need to diversify the ACE professions and we make an extra effort to encourage under-represented groups, women, and minorities to consider ACE careers," said Merighi.

The Cumberland County Team was created in 2004 as the third affiliate of NJ ACE

and is now one of nine groups in the state. In that first year, eight students participated. Now, the number is 30.

The group designs and presents a final project at the Innovation Center every year as a culmination of the school year's work.

In addition to Vineland and Millville, ACE has students from Bridgeton High, Cumberland Regional, Delsea, and Cumberland County Technical Education Center.

Then, some take their ACE enthusiasm to college, licensing, interning, and eventually becoming professionals in the fields of the built environment that they first experienced in the thought-provoking room in Cumberland County.

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