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opinion

Encourage kids to pursue construction careers

By Courtney Baker
Guest columnist

A recent survey from the Associated General Contractors of America shows 85% of construction firms across the country report having open positions they are trying to fill. Working at the Associated General Contractors of Virginia (AGCVA) it is my charge to find, vet and grow these needed workforce resources. As I travel the commonwealth, a repeated phrase I hear from those desperately needing help is, "Kids don't want to work these days."

I do not buy into this notion that youth are idle, and what better time to explore why than during Careers in Construction Month? Picture a school sporting event: painted faces, homemade signs, tailgating, cheerleaders, music — all there to celebrate the players and enjoy the thrill of competition. These players are up early for physical training, stay late for practice, endure the elements, and maintain their grades. No one would deny that these kids are working hard. But athletes are not the only ones displaying diligence and dedication. Why are young people under the Friday night lights elevated to a different level than a young person who is serious about laying brick, operating heavy equipment or practicing how to rough in plumbing?

Students who slog it out on the field are rewarded with pomp and circumstance and offered scholarships to universities. In stark contrast, a student who wants to spend their senior year learning to wire a building is not even eligible to graduate with an advanced diploma in most cases due to Virginia's outdated education laws.

Across Virginia, there are programs that are turning away dozens of students annually because classroom space is at capacity. Additionally, current Virginia Department of Education regulations hinder a school's ability to recruit and hire additional Career and Technical Education (CTE) instructors, often stifling the rate of growing programs.

Unmotivated youth exist, but that is not a blanket characteristic for those approaching the workforce. CTE classes

that are bursting at the seams, focused young people in student trade organizations such as SkillsUSA, and seniors proudly selecting their new company hat at career signing days are all evidence that laziness is not the case for most youth.

As working adults, it is important to remember how difficult it was to envision yourself as a successful, trained professional when you were barely coming to terms with entering adulthood. Innocent immaturity can easily make ambition and motivation turn enigmatic. We owe it to

the next generation to show up for them and have patience with them while they mature and develop the discipline that a career, specifically in the skilled trades, demands.

I can recount several times being faced with an attractive career opportunity but writing it off because it seemed too intimidating to pursue. My husband would graciously redirect me and claim, "Of course you can do it, you're smart, and I will help you." That is all the motivation I needed to try, and it has resulted in pushing myself, learning new skills, and working on memorable projects.

Could this be where we are with today's youth? Not a place of slothfulness, but a place of inexperience, wanting encouragement and needing guidance. Perhaps it is time to change our narrative from

"Kids don't want to work these days" to "Kids do want to work these days. They're smart, and I will help them."

In partnership with AGCVA and Build Your Future Virginia, Gov. Glenn Youngkin has proclaimed October as Careers in Construction Month. Virginia is joining this national campaign held every October to increase public awareness of construction careers, inspire the next generation of craft professionals, and showcase the positive impact a fulfilling career in construction can have on individuals and communities. Take the pledge, make an investment and support a young person who wants to work.

Courtney Baker is the director of workforce and training for the Associated General Contractors of Virginia, with headquarters in Glen Allen.

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