

Syrian newcomers get hands-on training

JUSTIN SAMANSKI-LANGILLE

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Mahmoud, Mohammad and Nazeih El Zohbi show off their certificates and hammers after completing a program designed to help them transfer their construction skill gained in Syria to the workplace here in Canada.

PHOTO: JUSTIN SAMANSKI-LANGILLE/TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

from the practical experience of building the shed.

“I expected it to be much harder because it is a totally different way of building than I am used to, but it was much easier than I expected,” said El Zohbi.

SAINT JOHN •
After two days worth of work spread out over four weeks, nine Syrian newcomers have completed building a professional-quality shed for the first time in their lives.

It may seem like a small achievement, but it is a huge step toward employment for the newcomers.

Nazeih El Zohbi said through a translator he benefited greatly

The shed was constructed as the final part of a program organized by the Saint John Multicultural and Newcomers Resource Centre in partnership with Habitat for Humanity Saint John with the goal of helping to integrate Syrian newcomers with construction experience into the Canadian workforce.

The group of nine men attended classes to learn industry terminology in English and the specifics of the construction process here in Canada such as how to build with wood instead of concrete and stone, how to put shingles on a roof and how to convert between metric and imperial measurements.

“We have two challenges with a newcomer,” said Habitat for Humanity Saint John CEO Kevin Perry.

“We have language and we have skill set. They already have a background, so let’s help them with the specific skills and the language.”

El Zohbi said he greatly benefitted from the practical experience,”

“At the beginning it was a bit tricky because it required a lot of focus and attention, but now I feel capable of doing this again.”

El Zohbi has his sights set on building two more.

C o n s t r u c t i o n b e g i n s n e x t w e e k o n a s e c o n d s h e d destined for a home built by Habitat for Humanity and El Zohbi is working with his son, Mohammad, as well as his brother Mahmoud.

“(My son and I) both really want to work, so it was very special to be partners on the job.”

The trio agreed the work was much easier than they are used to in Syria.

They said in Syria, construction is much more haphazard and labour intensive, whereas in Canada it is much more organized and precise.

El Zohbi said the precision work was his favourite part of the experience.

With the first program complete, plans are being made for round two.

P e r r y s a i d t h e n e x t g r o u p o f n e w c o m e r s w i l l b e g i n their program in the fall after Habitat’s busy home construction season is finished.

It won't be limited to newcomers from Syria.

Renovations to Habitat for Humanity's ReStore might even allow the group to build two sheds at once, increasing the amount of hands-on time for the students, said Perry.

For the new graduates however, focus now shifts toward the end goal - finding them employment.

"We are basically in the construction industry, we know a lot of contractors, we have a lot of contacts," said Perry. "We have had a chance to see these guys work, we know they are good. We can act as a reference and speak for them."