

Miracles at Manchester Bidwell



Using the arts, jobs training, and dignity, Pittsburgh nonprofit gives adults and youth the tools to transform their lives.

By Tim Grant

Jacob Thrower no longer relies on odd jobs to help make ends meet for him and his daughter. He put those days behind him in August 2021 after enrolling in one of the free adult education courses at Bidwell Training Center on Pittsburgh's North Side.

Even before the 37-year-old neighborhood resident finished the eight-month horticulture program at Bidwell, he was hired for a job at Plantscape, a commercial/residential landscaping company. And, when he graduated in March 2022, the nonprofit Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy offered him a job, too.

“Bidwell is the new breeding ground for great,” Mr. Thrower said, explaining that getting two job opportunities so quickly was an exceptional outcome for someone who completed the program. “You’re talking to a great.”

Bidwell Training Center graduates are employed in every major industry throughout the Pittsburgh region because of the center's long-standing relationships with employers who partner with Manchester Bidwell Corporation to train a workforce to meet their company's specific needs.

The [Manchester Bidwell Corp.](#), also based on Pittsburgh's North Side, operates Bidwell Training Center. Since 1968, Manchester Bidwell has provided technical job training at no cost to adults

who are chronically unemployed, laid off or under-employed. The nonprofit organization has helped thousands of workers at every stage of life transition to new careers.

“We remove all barriers that may prevent someone from coming to the program,” said Kevin Jenkins, president and CEO of Manchester Bidwell Corp. since 2018. “The end game for us is that our graduates are able to secure a job in their chosen field making a family-sustaining wage.”

People from different races and religions have discovered more similarities than differences among them while learning job skills and participating in art programs at Manchester Bidwell. The Pittsburgh model has been replicated in several U.S. cities. There’s also an international program in Akko, Israel, where 465 Arab and Jewish students interact and learn at a Manchester Bidwell-style facility.

“The center in Akko, Israel, is a perfect example of the universality of the principles that Manchester Bidwell embodies,” said Bill Strickland, executive chairman and founder of Manchester Bidwell Corp. “The work was carried out by men and women who fundamentally saw the dignity, value and potential of those around them and how removing barriers to opportunity serves and promotes the flourishing of both Jewish and Arab Israelis.”

Mr. Strickland, a recipient of a MacArthur “genius” grant, has often called his work, offering at-risk populations a path towards self-esteem and self-sufficiency, a miracle. It’s a miracle that can – and should be – stoked, Mr. Strickland believes, in an environment filled with beauty and art. In fact, Manchester Bidwell is part workspace, part gallery, a campus splashed with natural light, adorned with original art and photography on the walls, and its corners accented with flowers and plants.

The miracle for Mr. Strickland was born from the despair that followed the 1968 assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. That’s when Mr. Strickland’s advocacy for job training programs took shape. His response as a 19-year-old to seeing other young people in his neighborhood lost and not knowing where to turn was to start ceramics and photography classes for city school students inside an abandoned row house in a section of the North Side known as the Mexican War Streets. That dream grew to a 63,000-square-foot center and office building in the adjacent Manchester community.

Now, thanks to a \$500,000 grant from The Heinz Endowments and the Ford Foundation through the Pittsburgh’s Cultural Treasures Initiative, Manchester Bidwell Corp. keeps dreaming and growing.

Part of the gift was used to establish the William E. Strickland Jr. Fellow at the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild, an honor named after the guild’s founder. The inaugural artist-in-residence is Marcè Nixon-Washington, a graduate of West Virginia University with a B.F.A. in ceramics and an alumna of the Guild. Now, she’ll spend a year there, giving back to the young people and the environment that gave so much to her.

Under its Manchester Craftsmen's Guild division, Manchester Bidwell operates a robust after-school youth development program, using the arts and cultural offerings as a springboard for about 500 young people each year to nurture their creative side and think about their life beyond high school.

Manchester Craftsmen's Guild also houses MCG Jazz, which has a 350-seat music hall where live jazz performances are held about 10 months of each year. MCG Jazz has its own jazz recording label. Five Grammy Awards have come out of its recording studio — two from the late great Nancy Wilson, who recorded with Manchester Craftsmen's Guild.

Jazz is a form of music that has always inspired Mr. Strickland's art, which is why he always wanted a world-class jazz program as part of the nonprofit organization.

“When Bill was in high school, his ceramics teacher always had jazz playing in the background when he was in his studio working on his craft,” Mr. Jenkins said.

But, Manchester Bidwell Corp., in addition to being a parent company for Manchester Craftsmen's Guild and housing all the administrative functions for the nonprofit — such as finance, human resources and development — also operates two other affiliate organizations under its umbrella.

Bidwell Training Center, which provided career development to Mr. Thrower, is its adult career technical training program, where roughly 175 adults each year receive school-to-work training in six different fields: horticulture technology, medical assistant, medical coder/biller, pharmacy technician, chemical laboratory technician and culinary arts.

The other organization is Manchester Bidwell's National Center for Arts and Technology. It is a consulting arm of Manchester Bidwell Corp. that works with nonprofits in other cities to replicate its programs. In addition to the Akko Center, it has affiliate centers in Brockway, Pennsylvania; New Haven, Connecticut; and Grand Rapids, Michigan, as well as Boston, Buffalo, Cincinnati, Cleveland and San Francisco.

They are not franchises. Manchester Bidwell doesn't own the affiliate centers. They are independent nonprofit organizations.

The tuition, fees, uniforms, scrubs, knife sets and textbooks are covered for all accepted students. There's also a small slush fund for incidental expenses such as when students break their glasses or their car won't start because of a dead battery.

“Their job is to come here five days a week from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and work hard in the classroom and graduate and get a job,” Mr. Jenkins said. “So, if we can partner with them to remove some of those stressors in life, that's what we do.”

Anyone can take advantage of Manchester Bidwell's training programs. There is a short admissions examination that applicants must pass to ensure they have a minimum proficiency in

math and English to get through the training. About 80 percent of Bidwell's graduates secure employment upon graduation.

Braskem, the world's leading polymer producer, started a chemical laboratory technician program at Bidwell Training Center more than 30 years ago to specifically train a pipeline of skilled workers for the chemical industry in southwestern Pennsylvania.

The company's U.S. headquarters is in Philadelphia. It has an innovation and technology center in Pittsburgh where two Bidwell graduates currently work, said Jeff Salek, a manager at the Pittsburgh innovation and technology center. Mr. Salek has been with Braskem for 34 years. He has been involved in recruiting from Bidwell since the beginning.

"We actually hired a Bidwell graduate from the chemical laboratory technician program in the very first class," Mr. Salek said. "Placement rates at Bidwell for the chemical laboratory program many times is 100 percent. So, it's a very efficient education."

The curriculum used to train candidates was developed by companies in the local chemical industry, such as PPG, Covestro, Calgon Carbon and United States Steel.

Mr. Salek is a big fan of Bidwell after three decades of successfully recruiting from its chemical program. His own son recently graduated from Bidwell's nursing assistant program.

"I hate to see a four-year biology degree candidate spending \$150,000 on an education come in as a laboratory technician when they can go to Bidwell and do it in a year and not pay a cent."

Bidwell's training programs last from eight months to a year. But the training also includes an eight-week externship, which requires students to make field trips to prospective companies that might hire them upon graduation. That way they can talk to the managers and staff, perform some job duties on site and decide if they would like working there.

Dozens of companies participate in the school-to-work pipeline. Some include UPMC, Allegheny Health Network, University of Pittsburgh, Covestro, the Duquesne Club and the Nemacolin resort.

"To be able to look back over the decades of what we've done and know that tens of thousands of lives have been transformed by art, light and beauty — that careers have blossomed, that families have been lifted economically and socially, that kids have discovered their potential and changed their own communities — it's more than I could have hoped for or dreamed of when I started this all as a 19-year-old," Mr. Strickland said.

Mr. Jenkins, 61, a Pittsburgh native and Penn State University graduate, took over Manchester Bidwell Corp. in 2018 when Mr. Strickland gave up day-to-day management. He had served as chief operating officer at Bidwell since 2015. Prior to joining Bidwell, Mr. Jenkins had worked for The Pittsburgh Foundation since 2006.

He said what sets Bidwell apart from many institutions is its strong partnerships with industry employers, which allows Bidwell to know what the employment needs will be three-to-five years out.

Right now, he's having conversations with a group of veterinary technicians who have made it abundantly clear that it is a profession that's in demand for workers.

"They didn't know where else to go to hire or get people trained to take advantage of these jobs. So, they reached out to us." Mr. Jenkins said. "It's nothing we've ever done before. But we're having these conversations.

"There's also conversations with folks in the artificial intelligence space, or manufacturing spaces," he said. "What we're finding out is oftentimes it's not necessarily a lack of jobs. It's a lack of the appropriate skill sets to take advantage of those jobs."

For more than a half-century, Manchester Bidwell has used horticulture, photography, ceramics, culinary arts, music and technical training to lift people seeking a better life to higher ground. The beauty and art and skills development that gave a confidence and trajectory to Mr. Thrower to advance his horticulture career continues to make others "great" as well.

Tim Grant is a writer living in Pittsburgh.

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