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# Inclusion in the Industry

## Local architects, programs work to make the field more diverse

By Rhonda Crowder | Photo courtesy of ThenDesign Architecture

**A**chieving equality is everyone's job. According to the Construction Employers Association (CEA), Northeast Ohio's construction industry can be a national model. CEA encourages diversity and inclusion in workforce and contracting by providing collaboration and support for the advancement of construction and related (architectural, engineering and service/supply) industries.

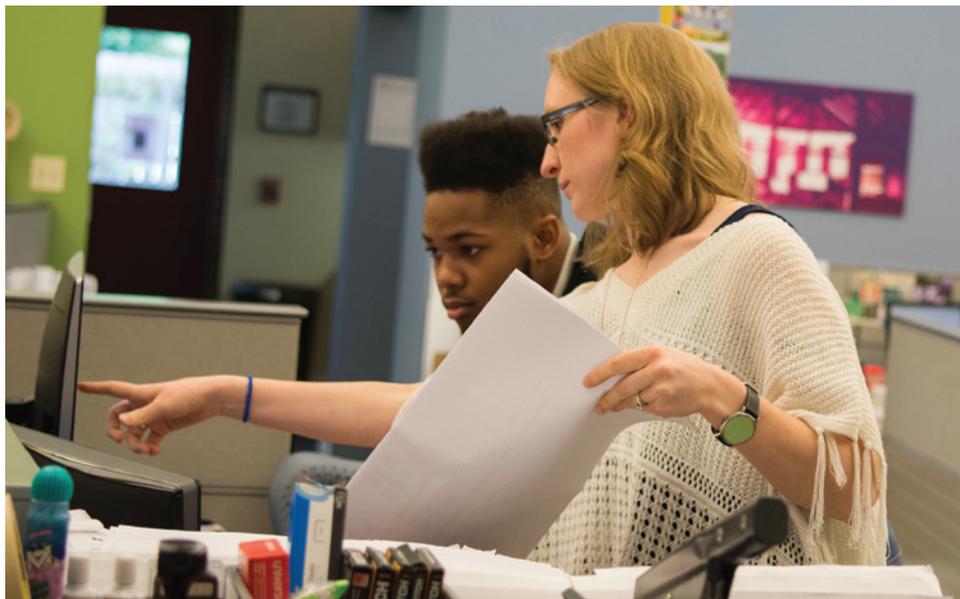
One way CEA does this is through its signature pipeline initiative, ACE Mentor Program of Cleveland (ACE), which is designed to attract high school students to careers in architecture, construction and engineering, including the skilled trades.

Over the past 10 years, ACE has awarded college scholarships totaling over \$1 million and provided shadowing and internship opportunities.

"These scholarships are one way we can create change in an industry that has, intentionally or unintentionally, created barriers that make it hard for people of color and women to compete," says Glen Shumate, executive vice president of CEA. "But if we intentionally lead our organizations to think and act differently when it comes to diversity and inclusion, we can create real change."

Becoming president of the Cleveland chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) in 2020 empowered Jodi van der Wiel, design director at Vocon, to "set the stage" for a more diverse and inclusive industry. She spearheaded AIA Cleveland's 2019-2023 strategic plan, in which both inclusivity and outreach became key tenets of the association's mission.

"Diversity will give us much-needed perspectives to solve our future issues as a human race," van der Wiel says. "Living through this pandemic has been a rude awakening for all of us, and a reminder that we, as a profession, need to think ahead to remain relevant. The world is becoming more complex and the field needs to be more diverse."



**BUILDING CAREERS** TyJuan Swanson-Sawyer (left) works with ACE Mentor and Architect Claire Markwardt Bank, RA (right), of ThenDesign Architecture. A former ACE program participant at John Hay High School, Swanson is currently finishing master's degrees in Urban Design and Architecture through Kent State University and is an architecture associate at TDA.

AIA's pipeline initiatives are dear to van der Wiel and are "key to ensuring the rich diversity of our profession," she says.

AIA Cleveland mentors through ACE, the Boy Scouts of America Lake

*"Diversity will give us much-needed perspectives to solve our future issues as a human race... The world is becoming more complex and the field needs to be more diverse."*

**Jodi van der Wiel**  
Vocon

Erie Council and the Girl Scouts of Northeast Ohio. When her daughter became a Girl Scout, van der Wiel learned there's no architecture badge available while the Boy Scouts have had one for over 100 years.

Data shows that if girls are not exposed and comfortable with STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) careers by middle school, they tend to become intimidated and shy away from these professions.

"AIA Cleveland and our WIA+ Committee have championed the GirlsBuild! Architecture Camp, providing the ability to earn an architecture patch designed by the women of AIA Cleveland," van der Wiel says.

In March 2020, WIA+ hosted an exhibit, funded by Cleveland Foundation, featuring minorities and women in architecture. The chapter also recently developed a nationally distributed digital Home Architecture Camp: A Toolkit.

"Diversity includes a lot of different people and groups of people," says Scott Whitley, owner of Whitley/Whitley Architects and Planners. "When I was president of Cleveland's NOMA

[National Organization of Minority Architects] chapter, I realized there were different areas regarding diversity and inclusion that members within the organization wanted to focus on.”

Relationships are key in architecture, and it’s often easier for majority architects to make connections. Whitley credits Shumate of CEA with connecting him to key members of the institutions that design and build in Cleveland.

As an African American owner, Whitley says his biggest challenge is letting people know he exists. “African American architects are a small group, maybe 2%, and African American architects who own their own firm are even smaller,” he says. “We’re so small, we’re easily overlooked. We have to fight to participate, to get an opportunity.”

“There are successful minority firms,” says Crystal Montgomery, a local historic preservation architect. “The opportunities are limited.”

W. Dan Bickerstaff, owner of Ubiquitous Design and AIA director of outreach, is credited with bridg-

ing the gap and utilizing resources between Cleveland chapters of AIA and NOMA.

“We’re working together to improve the industry,” says van der Wiel. “Our most recent endeavor, dreamARCHITECTURE, is a collaboration between

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**Scott Whitley**

*Whitley/Whitley Architects and Planners*

AIA and NOMA in the Shaker Heights School District. Eight hundred students have been engaged in this program to date through their curricula in the arts.”

TyJuan Swanson-Sawyer participated in the ACE program at John Hay

High School. He completed undergraduate work at Kent State University and is finishing master’s degrees in Urban Design and Architecture with the Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative through Kent State University’s College of Architecture and Environmental Design. He is also currently an architecture associate at ThenDesign Architecture.

When asked if he sees diversity within his program and the field, he says, “Yes and no. No, because there are not as many people of color as I would like it to be. But, in my grad program, there are more non-whites than I’ve ever seen.”

Swanson-Sawyer believes ACE has done an excellent job of getting more African Americans and Hispanics interested and credits it for his success. “Not

having the resources from ACE, it would’ve been a lot harder. I probably would still be an undergrad.”

One of his goals is to do for students what ACE did for him. “It starts with the kids,” he says. “I want them to see more people of color in this field.” **P**



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