

BUILD YOUR FUTURE

CONSTRUCTION IN THE CLASSROOM

Trades professionals share their real-life experiences with high school students as part of Build Your Future Arizona's new ambassador program

By REBECCA L. RHOADES



As a high school student in California, Janette Almanza had no idea what she wanted to do for a career. Because she prefers hands-on experience to classroom learning, college wasn't an option. She bounced from job to job trying to find a place where she fit in. Then five years ago, she landed at SSC Underground, a Phoenix-based construction firm that specializes in below-ground services, such as excavating, tunneling and boring for utilities, pipes and cables.

"When I came to Arizona, I witnessed how fast the state was growing in such a short amount of time, and I knew that it was something

I had to get in on," recalls Almanza, now a project coordination assistant at SSC. "I just fell in love with construction." She wishes she had known earlier about opportunities in the industry.

"In California, there aren't any requirements for students to take vocational classes, such as welding or woodshop," Almanza continues. "In fact, I didn't know anyone who took those types of classes. And nobody ever came in to talk to us about careers in the trades.

That's why, when asked to join Build Your Future Arizona's ambassador program, she jumped at the chance

to help spread the word about trades to students throughout the Valley of the Sun.

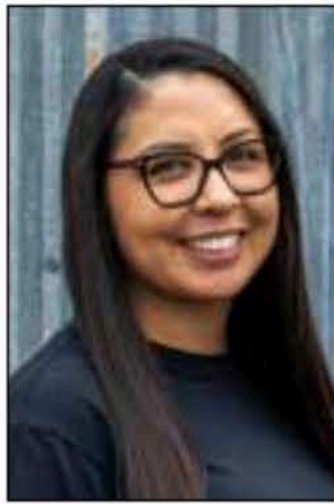
REAL-WORLD REPRESENTATION

Launched in spring 2022, the ambassador program builds upon the organization's awareness campaign, enlisting construction professionals to speak with students in Valley schools and at industry career fairs. Thirty-two people with jobs that span all aspects of the construction sector have signed up to serve as ambassadors — including Almanza. Most are young and in the early stages of their careers, making them more relatable

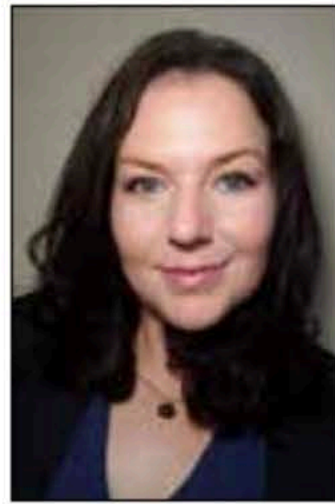
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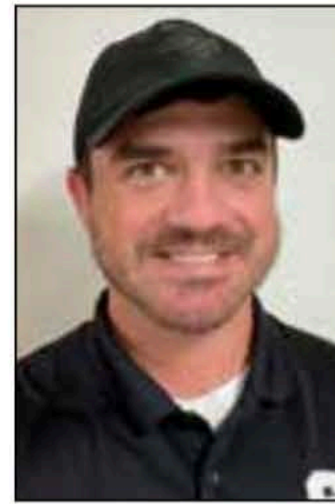
Matt Apodaca



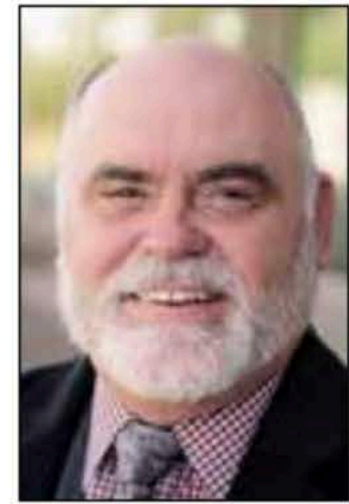
Janette Almanza



Blue Coble



Jared Hutchinson



Paul Sanders

to teenagers than, say, an executive or senior employee.

"We have everyone from people who are on the finance side of construction to electricians, heavy equipment operators, project managers and BIM (building information modeling) designers who are sharing their own experiences and what its really like to work in the construction field," says Paul Sanders, workforce development manager for the Greater Phoenix Chamber Foundation (GPCF).

Sanders' goal for the 2022-23 school years is to have 40 ambassadors who will attend 60 high school events.

The ambassador program has partnered with ElevateEdAZ. Like BYFAZ, ElevateEdAZ is an initiative of the GPCF. It supports career and technical education (CTE) programs in 13 high schools across Phoenix Union, Mesa Public, Paradise Valley Unified and Glendale Union school districts.

Since September, ambassadors have done 21 classroom presentations in front of 511 students, and attended two construction-specific career fairs

attended by 4,200 students and nine general career fairs attended by 3,800 students. Of the 8,000 students at the career fairs, ambassadors spoke directly with 1,100 of them about construction.

"More of those students had no idea what they wanted to do," Sanders says. "Some expressed interested in welding and electrical work."

For Blue Coble, attending career fairs as an ambassador allows her to share her experiences not only as a quality manager for McCarthy Building Companies but also as a union iron worker. "I'm very much into recruitment and retainment, especially for women and minorities," she explains. "There have been so many times where I was the only women on the job. Not only did I want other women to be able to talk to and have that mentorship, but I see how things change by introducing women and minorities into the industry. It brings a different perspective and elevates our culture overall."

Since joining the ambassador program, Coble has spoken in one

classroom and attended a couple career fairs. She has talked with students who are interested in pursuing careers in design and shared with them opportunities available in McCarthy's virtual design department. She recalls another student who was interested in getting into the demolition side of the construction industry. The young woman thought her only option was joining the military, which she wasn't particularly excited about.

"I asked her, 'Have you ever thought about doing mine work?' They use a lot of explosives in that field, and Arizona just happens to have the third-largest open pit mine in the world," Coble recalls. "She was really excited. She had no idea that was even a possibility."

SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS

Jared Hutchinson has been a construction technology instructor at Sunnyslope High School for five years. He reached out to Build Your Future AZ because he wanted someone to talk to his students about options other than college.

Build Your Future Arizona

What it is: Build Your Future Arizona's mission is to create a sustainable and skilled craft workforce by creating awareness about high paying construction careers, training opportunities and mapping career paths to employment in these high demand occupations. The organization is led by an industry steering committee made up of leading employers who have invested in Build Your Future Arizona's effort to inspire the next generation of craft professionals to construct a career. **Learn more: arizona.byf.org**

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“A lot of my students feel like college is their only option,” he explains. “I wanted to expose them to other opportunities. When they hear these stories, when they see it in real life, it’s so much more effective than just me telling them about it.”

Matt Apodaca, director of workforce development for Corbins Electric, spoke to Hutchinson’s class. “I’m very passionate about promoting the trade that has been so good to me throughout the years,” he says. “I tell the students that this is a great foundation that they can build upon, and that it’s a trade that will take care of you and fulfill you for many years to come.”

As part of his presentation, Apodaca shares the typical career path and pay structure of an employee at Corbins. For recent high school graduates who join the company and exhibit a strong work ethic, Corbins will enroll them in

school and pay for their education, on top of their hourly rate. “In four years, when they turn out as a journeyman, they have a skill set that’s good anywhere in the world — and they have zero debt. So they’ve built this foundation that’s worth \$70,000-\$90,000 a year by the time they’re 22 years old,” Apodaca says.

“It opens their eyes to things that aren’t always on the surface,” he adds.

Coble explains further. “Not only are we telling students about the possibilities and jobs in construction, but we’re also putting a person in the position where, if they have questions, they have someone they can ask, and that’s really important,” she says. “If you don’t know who to talk to, you don’t know what you need to even get the process started.”

Sanders notes that 53% of high school graduates in 2021 did not enroll

in college. Many end up working in food service or warehouses — jobs that typically do not have much of an upward career path.

Student response to the ambassadors has been positive. According to Hutchinson, “It gets them excited about being able to make their own decisions and not feeling as though they have to keep going to school in order to succeed.”

The companies also benefit. “We’ve seen an uptick in people who are talking about the trades and being vocal about wanting to be in the trades,” Almanza says. “By getting someone right out of high school and teaching them the way you need them to learn, you can have a long-term employee. And if you get a kid who’s 19 and he stays there for 10, 20, even 30 years, he’s going to know that job inside out.” ■■■