

## Immokalee building homes, students' foundational skills

Organization: \$7M project underway after planning

### Rachel Fradette

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Lamp posts are being placed, a paved road cuts through the planned subdivision, and the walls are up at a home on Foundation Way in Immokalee.

The 1,600-square-foot home is one of 18 that will be built by the Immokalee Foundation through its partnerships with Immokalee Technical College, BCB Homes and Collier Enterprises.

The goal of the project is to expand the hands-on experience for students like Daniel Trejo-Garcia who want a future in construction management.

“I’m already a senior so my resume is done and the best thing I can do right now is add more to it,” Trejo-Garcia said.

The 17-year-old Immokalee Foundation student is taking classes at Florida SouthWestern State College through early admission. He hopes to



**From left to right, Josue Lopez-Delacruz, 17, Eduardo Diego Marroquin, 17, and Diego Garcia, 16, work on a construction project under the supervision of Fenton Davis subcontractors Carlos Mejia and Luis Giron in Immokalee on Wednesday. Through the Immokalee Foundation program, students are able to gain hands-on experience with all aspects of construction while still in high school. PHOTOS BY ALEX DRIEHAUS/NAPLES DAILY NEWS**



**The first of 18 homes is being built through the Immokalee Foundation is under construction in Immokalee. The project was stalled last year.**

study construction management at Florida Gulf Coast University.

“Construction management is everything on the site, walking around seeing how things are being done, and I really enjoy that,” Trejo-Garcia said. “It’s a perfect mix.”

Collier Enterprises, a business and real estate investment company based in Naples, donated 8 acres near Immokalee State Farmer’s Market where the

management project as an Immokalee Foundation student.

The expansion to building homes and offering guidance to students with similar interests brings Hernandez joy, he said.

“They’re going to graduate with way more than what I got in high school,” Hernandez said. “They have more experience.”

homes are being built. BCB Homes is the general contractor while iTech supports onsite instruction for students.

The project, which is estimated to cost about \$7 million, is underway after years of planning thanks to community partners and donors, Noemi Perez, the organization's CEO and president, said.

"I feel like this is the beginning of so many other opportunities, not just developing projects like this to give them opportunities, but our entire career pathways model," Perez said.

Like most things, the construction project was stalled due to the coronavirus pandemic last year.

Subcontractors and students were supposed to be onsite last March but the pandemic set back the project's time frame.

But Perez said it allowed the foundation time to continue preparation.

"It allowed us to put in infrastructure and take that time we needed to make sure that everything was put into place while the kids were working from home so when they came back we were able to jump right in," Perez said.

The foundation's Career Pathways is a project that allows students to explore different career options from health care to business management and entrepreneurship to construction and engineering management. Students can also dive into education and human services.

The nonprofit foundation, which started 30 years ago, focuses on student educational success in the area.

The four different pathways offer options to more than 110 students, according to the foundation.

Students can work with counselors and advocates to develop a plan that works best for them and their career goals, Perez said.

Walt Buchholtz, a former ExxonMobil executive who serves as operations director, said job categories were narrowed based upon booming industries in Collier County.

"One thing the Immokalee Foundation does is they track their students not only all the way through middle school, high school, and post-secondary. They track

Building a house requires steady teamwork, especially during heavier construction stages, Trejo-Garcia said.

"It's something I never would have expected myself to be in freshman year," Trejo-Garcia said.

Students spend three hours, one day a week at paid internships. Students must be 16 years old before they can work on the construction site, according to the foundation.

Seven student interns are actively working on the first house.

Students who are not fully certified cannot perform certain jobs while constructing houses, but with supervision, they can observe subcontractors, Trejo-Garcia said.

On the construction site, students and instructors are wearing masks and following COVID-19 guidelines.

They are also required to sign in and perform temperature checks before getting to work. Hernandez said the foundation is focused on safety for all involved.

Each home will have three bedrooms, two bathrooms and a two-car garage. The first house in the subdivision is projected to be completed by June.

Every house will be listed for sale at market price and the earnings will go back into the program to build the remaining homes, Buchholtz said.

The still-unnamed subdivision is projected to be completed in the next five years, but homes will be placed on the market as they are completed by subcontractors and students.

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post, post-secondary so into the job market,” Buchholtz said.

For construction management and other labs the foundation wanted more professional experience for students to be more career-focused not just college-focused, Buchholtz said.

Daniel Hernandez, a coordinator for the engineering and construction pathway, started with the Immokalee Foundation in high school.

Hernandez was part of a different construction



**Kenet Flores, 18, right, works on a construction project with Fenton Davis subcontractors Carlos Mejia, center, and Luis Giron, left, last week in Immokalee. ALEX DRIEHAUS/NAPLES DAILY NEWS**

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