

Urban Rehabilitation

More than Meets the Eye

by Molly E. Butz

The story of how building components are rehabilitating troubled kids in Ohio.

at a glance

- ISUS is an charter high school for troubled teens in Dayton, OH.
- The students learn traditional subjects as well as career skills they can use when they graduate.
- ISUS students are taught how to design and build wall panels, and also participate in on-site construction.

To the unknowing passerby, areas of downtown Dayton, OH, such as Frank Street and the Wolf Creek Neighborhood (north of West Third Street) look just like the houses in any new construction development: spacious floor plans, crisp vinyl siding and inviting white porches. A gazebo park and children's playground have even turned one corner into a friendly meeting spot for neighbors. However, if you look a little more closely and ask a few more questions, you will learn that these houses tell a captivating story about more than just rehabilitating urban housing. They'll teach you about triumphs for troubled kids, run-down neighborhoods and an industry struggling with increasing labor demands. Follow me on my journey through their tale....

With some help from an industry insider, I found myself invited to a gala event in Dayton, OH at the Improved Solutions for Urban Systems High School (ISUS), a last chance program for kids that had dropped out or been kicked out of school and labeled "at risk." Some of them had been tangled up with the court systems and all of them seemed to be headed nowhere quickly. I had previous knowledge of ISUS and was pleased to have the opportunity to visit the area, attend the gala and meet with Ann Higdon, the President and founder of the school.

When Ann founded ISUS in the early 1990s, her mission was simple: provoke change in both the kids and the community. "I was concerned," Ann told me. "There were a lot of kids dropping out [of school]. In high school, I was one of those kids getting mostly Ds and I didn't attend classes regularly. I was fortunate, however, and someone took an interest in me my senior year. Without that, I'm not sure where I would be today."

Ann's vision for ISUS was to teach more than just the fundamentals of math and science; she wanted the students to graduate with the fundamentals of life, from responsibility to respect. So, in addition to learning the standard reading, writing and arithmetic (which they do, and at an accelerated pace), the students also learn career skills they can use immediately when they graduate.

It made sense, from Ann's perspective, to teach the students career skills in professions that were lacking in skilled labor supply. Therefore, by training students in areas like construction, manufacturing, healthcare and computer technology, she would be positioning them for employment opportunities immediately after graduation. In turn, everyone would benefit and ISUS would be creating an efficient and effective workforce development program, a subject that touches the building components industry very deeply.

Ann's "typical" student likely lacked the know-how or where-withal to look for a place that could help them develop any of these technical skill sets. Yet these were the jobs that would be the easiest to secure, the surplus of open positions a solid indicator, if you were a trained employee. The construction and building components industries, Ann's first focus, gave her the opportunity to make sure her students didn't end up on the streets or worse, behind bars, and give back to the community and an industry starved for prepared, talented employees. Ann had arrived at her strategy, and I arrived at ISUS.

I arrived, unfortunately, just in time to catch Ann on her way out the door, however. She was heading home to freshen up for the evening's events and was kind enough to offer me the few moments of time that she had, so I grabbed my luggage and rode home with her. A round of questions, a snack with

Frank Street About-Face

Ann's first project for the students at ISUS included the purchase of 13 houses on Frank Street in Dayton, OH. The total cost for the houses was \$50,000, exactly half of her initial \$100,000 loan. In 2001, ISUS sold the first new single-family home for \$79,000. As ISUS worked in the area the drug dealers and prostitutes began to scatter and long-term residents started paying more attention to their property. The community called it "The Miracle on Frank Street" and the work the ISUS students did transformed the neighborhood and set the stage for the entire area's subsequent development. Today, the homes the ISUS students have built in other areas sell for upwards of \$150,000, which helps the school continue to fund its programs.



her family and a quick change into my party dress, and we were back on the road again.

In our time together, Ann told me in her own words many of the things I had heard about ISUS, from the variety of career programs to the daily "family meetings" between the students and their instructors. I was already familiar with her brave beginnings (see sidebar above) and it was refreshing to hear the optimism in her voice as she talked about her students.

Once a student has been expelled from school, most people won't even give them the time of day. Ann decided to go the other direction and challenge her students to live up to their potential, a potential in many cases they themselves weren't even aware of. "We expect our students to work harder than 'normal' students," Ann said. "And we have a zero tolerance policy on drugs, violence and the like." Plus, she puts responsibility on each student the moment they walk in the door. "It's simple,"

Continued on page 44



Urban Rehabilitation

Continued from page 43

she continued, "You want change? You change first." You can see it in her eyes, each one of those students means something to her.

Before heading back to the school, I got my first glimpse of the students' work on the jobsite and I was immediately impressed (see photo above). One of the programs ISUS offers includes learning to design and build wall panels with further classes in on-site construction. The gala that evening was being held to raise funds and honor a prominent private donor who we met in the Wolf Creek Neighborhood in downtown Dayton, so that he and his family could see one of the current ISUS student projects. It was late enough in the day that the students were finished up and gone from the jobsite, so the reality of this school's programs hadn't really had a chance to sink in for me.

(Please note that here I might usually tell you a little about the donor for the evening, but the family prefers to remain anonymous. However, what I can tell you is that in 1992 ISUS began with a \$100,000 loan that Ann persuaded a local bank to lend to her on her word alone. Over time, ISUS has continued to create a successful return on investment and its programs thrive because of local and national donations and grants, including contributions from the Rotary Club of Dayton, an enthusiastic and major supporter.)

After a short caravan back to the school, the gala went off without a hitch. It was my first exposure to the students and I was moved as they shared their stories, each of them hav-

**"You want change?
You change first."**

ing overcome very different, but equally disturbing obstacles. One nice young man even came in his Army dress greens to share his triumph: achieving his dreams of becoming a paratrooper.

The next morning I was scheduled to tour the ISUS facility and jobsites with John Seebock, one of the numerous ISUS counselors. He graciously drove me all around town to visit the various places touched by the ISUS students. It was an amazing, if not emotional, experience as we passed house after house created with craftsman-like skills. One home, still under construction, allowed me the opportunity to meet some of the students (ages 16-21) and marvel at their handiwork and courteous behavior. Some of them ex-drug users or dealers, some high school drop-outs and yet others tossed out on the streets by their own parents, each gave a yes ma'am in response. I was proud to imagine any of these students obtaining jobs with any of the manufacturers in our industry.

Here was a group of kids, and I mean kids, out in the field putting every ounce of their effort into these homes literally from the foundation up. Back on campus, another group of students was training to use the design software and newly installed automated wall panel equipment (which took Ann years and even a trip to Japan to research.) Each student was working hard at learning useful skills, appreciating their responsibilities and loving every minute of it.

Continued on page 48

MSR LUMBER PRODUCERS COUNCIL



13th Annual MSR Lumber Producer's Council Conference

March 28 – 30, 2007



**Come and enjoy the beauty
and splendor of the Southwest**

**Orange Tree
Golf Resort
Scottsdale, Arizona**

For detailed information go to
www.msrlumber.org or call (888) 848-5339

For reader service, go to www.sbcmag.info/msrlpc.htm. See additional ad on page 21.

RAM EASYSIDER

See why it is taking the industry by storm.

More than 75 RAM Easy Rider systems have been installed in just the last 18 months. One truss plant alone has 16 Easy Riders in everyday operation. Clearly, it is the most successful truss fabrication system ever introduced. Why? The answer is simple. Because you can build more trusses with less labor. Its unique distribution of workload keeps the manufacturing process smooth, efficient and highly productive.

The AutoSet C4 is an exciting new addition to the complete line of available jiggging options. The C4 is an automated jiggging system with an innovative offset drive that keeps table slots clear and open to the floor for easier maintenance. **AUTOSET C4**

See for yourself why the RAM Easy Rider is the component industry's leading trackless truss fabrication system. Call your Alpine representative to learn what the RAM Easy Rider can do for your production and ask for a copy of the video showing the Easy Rider in action.

EQUIPMENT
ALPINE
A Division of Alpine Engineered Products, Inc.
an ITW Company

www.alpineequip.com



800-755-6005





Urban Rehabilitation

Continued from page 44

Talk about a feel-good day. I had just witnessed the ultimate win-win situation. Not only were the ISUS programs rehabilitating urban housing, they were rehabilitating the students as well. And it was certainly no secret that the ISUS students were perfectly primed to enter "my" industry, designing and manufacturing structural building components.

Now, twice a year, ISUS students graduate, each with a high school diploma, not a G.E.D., and have the life and jobs skills they need to be granted employment opportunities and meaningful jobs most of them never thought, or in some cases even cared, about. Each of them will be filling another much needed position in their field, from nurses to truss technicians.

As my trip came to a close and I headed for the airport, I realized that it would have been easy for people to turn Ann away when she came to them asking for help, financially or otherwise. I mean, who wants to throw a bunch of money at kids that had essentially failed at every other opportunity given to them? But she persevered by knocking on the right doors and showing the community how much they could save



in court and jail costs by spending money on the front end to help save these kids from "the system." Because of that, her students continue to thrive year after year. It wasn't easy, but Ann and her wonderful staff have combined youth development, economic development, community development and workforce development and they did it all in an old plumbing supply warehouse in downtown Dayton, OH.

Her students call themselves "transcenders" because they've found a way to rise above the odds and succeed. It's cliché, but it was inspirational and I walked away from those houses with a challenge, a challenge to provoke change.

Do you want change? You know what to do. **SBC**

Wright Brothers Home Replica

In 2003 Dayton, OH celebrated the 100th anniversary of powered flight by dedicating a new national park (Aviation Trail Interpretive Center) and inviting builders to refurbish homes in the Wright Dunbar community for "Citirama." When ISUS students were invited to participate in Citirama, they wanted to build something significant that would draw on the important history of the neighborhood. The result: an exact replica of the original Wright brothers home. [Source: www.isusinc.com]



W T C A

Many Thanks to Our TTT Online Training Partners









For details, contact
WTCA at
608/274-4849
or visit
www.sbcindustry.com.



For reader service, go to www.sbcmag.info/wtca.htm

I-Joists, Components, P.E.T. Studs, Pallet Stock, The L-M Saws, Will Do It All! Leading the industry in bundle cross cut systems, since 1957!



Traveling Arch Saw
Hydraulically controlled
No manual cutting



The New L-M "I-CUT" System
60' long frame to precision cut your I-Joists



Portable Yard Saw
3 inch side shift, a standard feature
100's in operation world wide!



The Verticut P4 System will process three 8 foot bundles of lumber to P.E.T. stud length in less than 13 minutes

Visit our web site www.LMSaws.com to see our complete product line and videos!

L-M Equipment Co. Ltd

Phone: 604-431-8800 Toll Free: 1-800-455-8807 Web Site: www.LMSaws.com E-Mail: Sales@LMSaws.com

For reader service, go to www.sbcmag.info/l-mequipment.htm

STRUCTURAL BUILDING **COMPONENTS**TM

THE FUTURE OF FRAMING

www.sbcmag.info

Dear Reader:

Copyright © 2007 by Truss Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. For permission to reprint materials from **SBC Magazine**, call 608/310-6706 or email editor@sbcmag.info.

The mission of **Structural Building Components Magazine (SBC)** is to increase the knowledge of and to promote the common interests of those engaged in manufacturing and distributing of structural building components to ensure growth and continuity, and to be the information conduit by staying abreast of leading-edge issues. SBC will take a leadership role on behalf of the component industry in disseminating technical and marketplace information, and will maintain advisory committees consisting of the most knowledgeable professionals in the industry. The opinions expressed in SBC are those of the authors and those quoted solely, and are not necessarily the opinions of any affiliated association (WTCA) .



6300 Enterprise Lane • Suite 200 • Madison, WI 53719
608/310-6706 phone • 608/271-7006 fax
www.sbcmag.info • admgr@sbcmag.info