

Earning pay and an education

Summer academy teaches students through hands-on construction, while earning cash and college credits

By Anita Burke
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A hillside overlooking Willow Lake served as a learning laboratory for six Jackson County construction management students this summer, and now, thanks to their labors, campers will have two new lodging options at the lake next year.

The student crew is wrapping up work on two yurts this week as part of an eight-week Construction Academy offered by Rogue Community College and the Oregon Building Congress.

The academy provided high school students with a summer job and a chance to earn college credit.

"It's a double bonus for me," said Tanner Bean, a 17-year-old senior at Crater High School. "It's hard to find work, so I was happy to get this.

"This was really fun. I learned so many different things."

The teens took a safety course and other classroom training, demolished an old cabin, surveyed the site to determine where to place the yurts, poured concrete footings, built decks and flooring platforms and started assembling the yurts from Pacific Yurts in Cottage Grove on Monday.

They stretched the lattice walls, framed a door and slotted in roof rafters, quickly creating the supports for the circular shelters that have roots reaching back to the Central Asian steppes.

"It helps me see what goes into a construction project," said Tom Beech, a 16-year-old North Medford High School student who wants to become an architect.

One lesson learned, he said, was that preliminary work to prepare for the project took longer than expected.

"It's a real learning experience," said Mitch Tucker, the project manager supervising the student crew and himself a recent graduate of RCC's construction technology program.

He said 34 high school students applied to the program. They each submitted a job application and resume, and provided teacher recommendations and details about grades and high school courses.

Finalists went through an interview process with the human resources department at Batzer Inc., said Ralph Henderson, head of RCC's construction-technology program. Six students were chosen.

"I told them they were hired for this job and they could be fired from this job," Tucker said, describing the real-world experience the students gained.

Students earned minimum wage for the time they spent in the classroom, touring other work sites, and in demolition and construction at Willow Lake, Henderson said. They also earned credit for two RCC construction technology classes, while gaining math, communication and problem-solving skills.

"I like doing hands-on work and seeing things come together, so this works out really nice for me," said Tyler Trujillo, a 17-year-old South Medford High School student whose English teacher steered him to the summer program.

Trujillo said he's considering a career as a contractor, electrician or firefighter, so he was glad for the chance to try out an option that can help him figure out which sort of work he enjoys most.

North Medford High School senior Justin Shirley, 17, also was pleased to get experience on a job site — an asset he thinks will give him more to offer than a typical 18-year-old when he starts applying for construction jobs after his next birthday.

"The coolest thing is being at a job site and getting experience while we're still under 18," Shirley said.

Henderson said the college and Oregon Building Congress strive to attract and train students for careers in construction trades. This summer's academy was funded by a \$29,000 U.S. Department of Labor grant, as well as assistance from local partners [including the **Gordon Elwood Foundation**].

Dick Goodboe, owner of Rogue Recreation, the concessionaire who operates the Willow Lake campground for Jackson County, is pleased to have another option to offer campers. The yurts, which will be available to rent next summer, will be less expensive than the cabins at the lake, but less rustic than tent camping. He expects to start taking reservations in January.

"This is a new resource at no cost to county taxpayers," Goodboe said.