



# Building a *Better Future* at Lake Street Works

**Teens enter the program to learn skills for construction trades. Along the way, they gain self-discipline, respect for others, and a passion for excellence.**

For too many kids growing up in Minneapolis, life beyond high school does not hold a lot of promise. After graduation, the jobs available to them—often in service industries—are low wage with little prospect of career growth. For those who cannot afford a college education, the future might seem bleak. Yet Jess Coykendall, program director of Lake Street Works, a trades training facility in South Minneapolis, sees another path to middle class prosperity—the construction industry.

“There’s a huge variety of opportunities in construction,” Coykendall said. “Some trades people are earning six-figure salaries.” And with only a high school degree or training-program certificate, he added. “We’re here to help our students figure out what they’re good at, what they have a passion for, and what they can build on for a career.”

**Based in South Minneapolis, Lake Street Works teaches high school seniors skills for a dozen different trades, including drywall, electrical, carpentry, HVAC, and more.**

Meeting twice a week for four hours after school, students work one-on-one with instructors to learn everything from basic tool use to advanced framing techniques. Thanks to generous donations from Milwaukee Tools and Ideal Tools, the future tradespeople are set up with state-of-the-art tools, workstations, cabinets, and other equipment.

Limited to just 59 students per 10-month term, Lake Street Works only accepts students whose families are at or below the poverty line. Coykendall said the program is deliberately small because it fosters critical mentor relationships between instructors and students.

“Adults must have that face time with students. Otherwise, there’s no connection, and no accountability. You can’t hold a kid’s feet to the fire if you don’t have time to do it,” said Coykendall, who stresses that instilling kids with a sense of personal responsibility and work ethic is a central pillar of the program.

“We spend half the night working on the construction trades, and the other half working on life skills,” Coykendall noted. “Some people call them soft skills, but from this neighborhood, they’re not easy. I call them hard skills.” This includes the basics of social

interaction, like looking someone in the eye and giving a firm handshake when you're introduced. They also tackle ethics and moral principles.

"We work our way through five core values. Growth, respect, integrity, excellence, and duty," said Coykendall. Eventually, this leads to bigger conversations about living a purposeful life. "So many kids that come out of this neighborhood are floating. They don't know what they're supposed to be doing in life. They don't have time for that." Coykendall feels an urgent need to help them figure it out now, so that by the time they graduate, they're ready to launch.

Ultimately, Coykendall believes that the life skills teens acquire at Lake Street Works have equal, if not greater value than the technical training. After years of working with construction firms, he has learned they're not looking for fully trained tradespeople to join their teams.

"Give me a kid who will show up on time. That's what contractors tell me," Coykendall said. "Give me a kid who understands the importance of attendance. Give me a kid who's ready to work hard. Give me a kid with character. We'll show them the ropes—teach them the trade, and give them a good career."

But given today's housing market, will there be enough construction jobs waiting for Lake Street Works Class of 2025 when they graduate? In a 2023 survey of residential construction firms conducted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, 66% of respondents said higher interest rates were slowing the rate of home construction in Minneapolis. Consequently, hiring fell off; a trend that continued into 2024.

"Builders are afraid to build spec homes with high interest rates," said Mary Jo Quay, a Realtor® with Epique Realty who volunteers at Lake Street Works. An active member of the Builders Association of Minnesota and Housing First, Quay understands

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the challenges facing Minnesota's residential construction industry. "If you go on the MLS and look up homes built in 2023, you'll see that more than half the contractors are selling dirt. To be built. That same year, 30% of buyers cancelled contracts because of interest rates," said Quay. "While demand hasn't slowed, the rates are a drag on the industry and the wider economy."

In a widely anticipated move, the Federal Reserve cut interest rates by half a percentage point in September. Although this was welcome news, it is not expected to significantly impact mortgage rates, which were hovering just above 6% in September, the lowest since February 2023. Due to that and factors like material costs, zoning regulations, and land-use laws, it's unlikely there will be a boom in residential construction any time soon.

Fortunately for graduates of Lake Street Works, construction jobs in industrial, commercial, and civic infrastructure continue to grow, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. In fact, apprenticeships in these sectors—both private and state sponsored—have long waiting lists. That's why Coykendall encourages his students to attend schools like Dunwoody College of Technology in Minneapolis, which offers technical training in construction sciences and building technology.

The appeal of careers in the trades is spreading. As millions of American college students graduate each year into a fiercely competitive job market saddled with crushing loan debt,

more college-track high school students are reconsidering their options.

"Every parent in the U.S. believed that only a white-collar job would bring success to their kids," said Quay. "And if you want to be in biochemistry, medicine, engineering, then college is still the answer. But for the kids who are 18 and have no idea what to do with their lives, why should they spend \$30,000 to \$40,000 per year for a degree that won't get them a good paying job?" By contrast, she notes, trades offer good wages even during apprenticeships.

"If you are really good, you can start your own company," Quay said. And it all starts with programs like Lake Street Works. "It takes kids from rough backgrounds with few resources and gives them opportunity, resources, and hope." All key ingredients for building a better future for themselves and their families.

You can learn more about the program by visiting [Lakestreetworks.org](http://Lakestreetworks.org). The organization frequently visits Minneapolis high schools and area career fairs to connect with students. Lake Street Works will begin accepting applications for the next cohort in January 2025. Only students who expect to graduate in Spring 2026 will be eligible for the program.





An instructor at Lake Street Works shows a student how to operate a miter saw. Carpentry is one of more than a dozen trades students experience during the 10-month program for high school seniors.

**Top:** Jess Coykendall of Lake Street Works (right) meets with Mary Jo Quay, a Realtor® who volunteers for the youth-focused, trade-skills training program.

**Bottom:** Mary Jo (second from right) regularly volunteers with staff and students at Lake Street Works.

