

COMMUNITY PARTNER SPOTLIGHT
SAWHORSE REVOLUTION

Carpentry as a Revolutionary Act

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MBAKS

Sawhorse Revolution isn't just empowering youth and building community. They're training the next generation of trades professionals.



We get to infuse our programs with a sense of adventure and meaningful design-build projects for the community.

SARAH SMITH, Sawhorse Revolution

Fewer young people are entering the trades. The Associated General Contractors of America reports that 80% of Washington construction companies say it's difficult finding qualified workers. Meanwhile, a lack of affordable housing is displacing communities of color, immigrants, and low-income families from historically diverse Seattle neighborhoods.

These may seem like unrelated issues, but to Sawhorse Revolution, they're inextricably connected. For the past decade, Sawhorse has forged the next generation of trades professionals by training youth in carpentry. They do it with hands-on design-build projects that create and preserve housing and community spaces in under-resourced neighborhoods.

Sawhorse Revolution embraces carpentry because it offers young people proof of their ability to succeed. It encourages teamwork, introduces them to the trades, and develops practical job skills. Most Sawhorse Revolution programs provide 40–60 hours of direct building time—the study equivalent of a college-level course.

Originally established in 2010 as a summer camp program, Sawhorse was an outgrowth of the Great Recession. Co-founder and Executive Director Sarah Smith recalls her own job prospect difficulties. “My friends and I decided to address the lack of hands-on and job-relevant training we and future generations had. In our first summer camp, we teamed up 15 teens with three carpenters and volunteers to build a tree house 30 feet up in the forest canopy.”

In 2012, Sawhorse created a nonprofit afterschool program in Seattle. Founding Executive Director Adam Nishimura secured funding and they never looked back. Sawhorse now primarily serves high school students from Central and South Seattle, seeking to foster “confident, community-oriented youth through the power of carpentry and craft.”

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of 2018, 77% of carpenters in the U.S. were white and a staggering 98% were men. To halt the decline in the number of trades professionals, this glaring disparity needs to be addressed.

Sawhorse students have built tiny homes to address homelessness, a community garden shed, and a wheelchair access ramp as part of MBAKS' annual Rampathon™ event.



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Sawhorse leads the way. Three-quarters of participants are people of color, three-quarters are from low-income backgrounds, and more than half are female. Of the 800-plus students served through the program, 30% are Black, 26% white, 20% Asian, 11% Latino, and 3% African immigrant.

This is the next generation of trades professionals. Instilling in them the confidence and skills to succeed in life validates Sawhorse's existence. What

makes it revolutionary is its emphasis on building community. As more long-time residents of historically diverse neighborhoods are displaced, there is a pressing need for preserving community resources.

In one recent Sawhorse program, an all-women team designed and built Seattle's first "tiny cultural space" in the Central District. For the project, students chose to build a 2,000-square-foot structure for Estelita's Library, a Black-owned bookstore and library. The space will house thousands of books on race and social justice geared to all ages, free of admission.

The library not only creates cultural space for contemplation, organizing, and activism in a historically Black neighborhood; it also resulted in two students' acceptance into architecture school, letters of recommendation for four college applicants, and six female builders now engaged in the trades.

This is just one of nearly 60 projects Sawhorse Revolution has completed.

Sawhorse students have built tiny homes to address homelessness, including Salish House with Olson Kundig and LMN Architects and Fireweed House with Mithūn. They've built an ornate garden shed for AfricaTown's community garden in Columbia City. In 2019, they worked with Neil Kelly to build a wheelchair access ramp for a family in South Seattle as part of MBAKS' annual Rampathon event.

Aaron Adelstein, director of programs & products at MBAKS, praises the organization. "Sawhorse Revolution is a great partner for us because they use the development of construction skills as a means to instill confidence and leadership among the youth of communities in need."

For Sarah Smith, it's all about the work. "I am inspired by the fact we get to infuse our programs with a sense of adventure and meaningful design-build projects for the community. Each project is a discovery, for the students, the builders, the designers, and the community we are working with."

That's a revolution that Seattle—and the homebuilding industry—desperately need. 🏡

