



What Are We Doing to Cure the Workforce Gap?

By Bob Dills

I would like to share my thoughts about what the **GROW Organization** is doing to cure the workforce gap in the facilities management profession. Frankly that is a huge objective, and I'm happy to say that at GROW we are only a small part of a large community striving to refill the ranks. And the mission of GROW involves attract-

ing talent to a wide range of built environment careers, not in facility management alone.

We have an expanding workforce gap in many of the built environment professions, from design and architecture, throughout the building trades, and all of the sustaining services for the buildings we create and maintain. I certainly feel it in my own HVAC company, with several of our most experienced and valuable technicians retiring in the past couple of years. None of these roles are easy to fill.

I had the honor of co-founding the GROW Organization along with Julie O'Loughlin in 2013. This effort began as her dream to grow the built environment professions to better reflect the communities in which we live and work. That led to the creation of a Diversity Mentoring and Scholarship Program within **IFMA Silicon Valley** a few years before we expanded the services we could provide by spinning off as an independent 501(c)(3) public charity. GROW comes from what we strive to provide to young adults from underserved communities: guidance, resources, opportunities and work. Our services include mentoring, internships and scholarships.

I should tell you about two of our most recent interns. When we met Jessica, she was completing her business administration classes at **Job Train** in Menlo Park. Job Train is a charity providing workforce training with which GROW has partnered.

Jessica was an expectant mother, soon to greet her first child, a daughter. Jessica grew up in Richmond, CA which has some very troubled streets. She was determined to

provide a better world for her little girl and had recently moved to Redwood City as she completed her studies.

GROW was able to arrange an internship in the accounting department of a specialty building contractor's office, where she absolutely excelled. She and her daughter are spending some time bonding now, but there is a job waiting for Jessica whenever she is ready.

Another of our proud recent interns is Shir. Well, actually Shir's position extended into a full-time contract position which may last as long as two years, but more about that later.

Shir grew up in Kabul, Afghanistan and during high school, he heard the U.S. Special Forces were recruiting for translators to serve on the battlefield. Shir speaks and reads English, Pasto and Dari (Farsi), so he immediately jumped at the chance to serve and potentially better himself. He left before completing his high school studies and served with valor for more than five years. He cherishes the nearly two dozen letters of recommendation from the officers he served. In one of the letters, a general speaks of him as Mikey, the name they provided to help shield his true identity for the safety of his family at home. The general speaks of Mikey resupplying depleted ammunition

to his soldiers on the battlefield, citing bravery for which medals are awarded to soldiers. This is one of many times in which Shir saved the lives of our men who are now home safely with their families because of "Mikey's" courage.

After completion of his five-year assignment, Shir was able to emigrate to the Bay Area with his young wife and infant son. He came to the attention of GROW Board Member Melody Spradlin who arranged for Shir to obtain a position on the construction commissioning team at **Gilead**, a global pharmaceutical company. At Gilead, a group of his teammates serve as his mentors and tutors as Shir works to obtain his GED, in order to go onward to his dream of becoming a construction engineer.

Shir is an inspirational speaker and tells of how he often looks up from his desk, feeling like he is dreaming. Surrounded by engineers and not fearing today is the day he will die. He is so proud of the life he is building here for his family!

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And at GROW, we so proud to play a small role in the lives of people like Jessica and Shir. We are a small organization, with a humble war chest we earn each year from a single fundraising event and private donations. Frankly, our riches are the relationships we have with so many fine people in the professions we connect with each day.

We are lucky that when we reach out to one of our industry friends and ask them to consider providing an internship, we are rarely turned away. I think that comes from knowing that for each of us, at some point back in time, there was someone who gave us a hand. And there comes a time in each of our lives when we know it is time to pay that forward. GROW just is lucky to be here and to share that moment.

If you would like to be a part of what we are doing at GROW, please reach out any one of our Board Members: Nichole Robertson (NicholeR@GROWorganization.org), Melody Spradlin (MelodyS@GROWorganization.org) or me (BobD@GROWorganization.org). And for additional program information, see www.GROWorganization.org ■

Dills is an owner with a group of business partners of Western Allied Mechanical in Menlo Park, a leading HVAC contractor specializing in high performance environments. He is a past president of IFMA Silicon Valley, and AFE Chapter #39. Beyond his current service as executive director of the GROW Organization, Bob is also a Trustee of the IFMA Foundation, a 501(c)(3) global charity.