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## From blight to right, YEP students restore abandoned homes in East Oakland (Community voices/Slideshow)

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Michael Johnson at work.

In one block sits a house that has become an eyesore – blighted by a mattress, two big easy chairs spilling cotton into a yard gone to weeds and other trash.

Across the street is a store that has been boarded up and abandoned so long the security bars on the doors are corroded with rust.

Half a block away is another abandoned home – with the sounds of hammers and drills filling the air as a crew of young people busily work to restore it to its former glory. They are students from the [Youth Employment Partnership - YEP](#) - a program started in 1973.

On one of the days I visit the site, I meet Vu Ahn, a supervisor trainer. Ahn has worked with YEP for eight years. I am introduced to some of the young people working on the house: Champagne Zedd, 20; Everett Williams, 19; Michael Johnson, 23; Lavincea Johnson, 20; Orlando Adams, 24; Corey Ogden, 19; Walter Mitchell IV; Robert Thomas, 18; Allen Waters, 22; Stephanie LeDon, 19. The students talk about their work with YEP and [the restoration project](#).

### Identity

blight, D. Jean Collins, East Oakland, employment, GED programs, restoration, youth

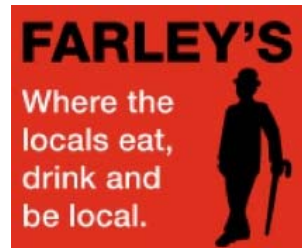
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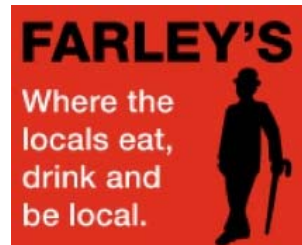


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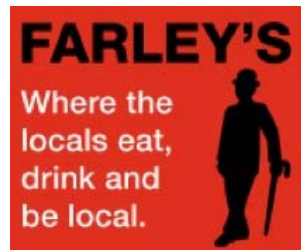
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**OL:** How did you get involved in the program?

**Corey:** I heard that with YEP, you could go to school and work. I didn't know there was a three week program before that, the Job Readiness Training. JRT made me want to stay; I could see they wanted to weed out the good from the bad. I liked the program, I stayed and I ended up doing construction. I'd had a lot of let downs, but with this, I can keep going forward. I can look back and see my own work and be proud of myself.

**Michael:** I came to the program twice before, I didn't feel like I belonged. This time I made it all the way through JRT, working on this house makes me want to finish. I need my GED so I'm going for it. I like this program; it's helping me a lot. I don't have to worry about police coming and looking for me, none of that.

**Lavincea:** I just moved to Oakland and I heard about the program. I came out here when I was pregnant with my daughter. I wanted to do something better with my life. I didn't think I could handle construction, but I'm enjoying it now.

Alex Colt, a licensed general contractor, has worked with YEP in the construction department for four and a half years.

"We are doing a complete remodel – gutting the entire interior and doing structural work on the house," Colt says. "We aren't rushing to get it done and as such, have taken a Green slant on the remodel."

**OL:** What has working on this project done for you?

**Walter:** I feel like this project made a whole person out of me. It's not everyday that a young black man gets to restore a house. I couldn't sit back and let this opportunity pass me by.

**Robert:** This makes me feel good; no one can take this feeling from me. At first, I didn't have a job or go to school. Now I'm doing both. Can't nobody tell me nothing.

**Michael:** It makes me feel like I can do something. Anything that goes wrong in my house, I'm going to get on it fast, I can fix it. When I leave here, I don't want to take off my construction clothes. I get home and I show off how hard I worked by the dirt and stuff on my clothes; some of it I got on there on purpose. And this group is like my family.

Diane Ramirez recently moved to Oakland and has been a construction trainer for a year. She said she feels the GED classes are vital to the project.

"These young people are 18 to 24. There are not a lot of services for this age group, and they can't go back into the high schools," she says. "So part of this program involves helping them get their GED."

**OL:** How does the GED part of the program help you?

**Orlando:** Whatever problems you had in school, it teaches you how to work on them and how to take tests. I need it; when I was going to school I wasn't into math or science, I was into the streets. Now that I'm older, I know that I need my education. No lady wants an ignorant man.

**Stephanie:** It's discipline. I've learned to get up early. After we get out of work here, we have lunch, and then we go to GED class until 4:30 p.m. It's a full day, it's intense.

"The Oakland Housing Authority owned the house and sold it to YEP for a dollar to use as a 'living classroom' for our construction classes," Gaylon Parsons, director of Development and Evaluation, says. "The students are flourishing in their 'living classroom.'"

**OL:** How will you use this experience?

**Robert:** I learned how to stick to my work; I learned how to set goals. I want to be a homicide detective or U.S. Marshal. I want to be in the law enforcement field to

help protect our community.

**Lavincea:** Like the others, I've learned discipline, to get up early, to work hard at something you like to do. I want to own my own business. I want to be wealthy ... not rich, but wealthy.

**Michael:** I take my GED test today for science. I hope I pass; I've studied hard. I'd like to stay in construction and start my own landscaping business. I want to help young people who are having a hard time finding jobs because they are on probation or parole because right now there aren't too many job openings for us. I want to help them like YEP helped me. It's a good thing.

**Stephanie:** I want to do something in the medical field. I'm not sure what, but I'm looking into it.

**OL:** How does this program affect your family and the community members who watch how this house is being restored by young people?

**Robert:** My family is proud of me. I feel the people in the community are happy because we're building something for them. They said this house is going to go to someone with low income. So that's helping someone in the community.

**Lavincea:** Working on this project helps me take care of my daughter; I don't have to go on welfare. I don't know how anyone else feels, but my daughter is proud of me and I'm proud of me.

**Corey:** I don't know how my family feels about it. I believe in the community some people are excited and happy that we are doing this, working and coming together. Then there are those who wonder why we're getting to do this, they look down on us. They feel uncomfortable when they see us coming down the street in groups, even though we're wearing hard hats and overalls. We're not doing anything bad, but they still call the police when they see us walking down the street. This is real life.

**Walter:** My mother and my other are happy that I am doing this because they don't have to wonder where I am and what I'm doing. They say they are proud of me and want me going this same route, not falling back into what I used to do. I'm proud of myself. Sometimes I do feel like going back, but I know it's just the devil riding my back; I kick him off real quick. It's all good.

**Michael:** My mother is proud of me because I'm doing better, I'm changing my ways. But I wanted to change my ways. When you're out in the streets, where I grew up, it gets tiring. What are you out there for? You're not doing anything. Sometimes when I leave here, I wonder why I left, I'm bored. At least working here, I know what I'm doing and I know when payday comes, I have some money coming in.

**Allen:** I feel like he said, when I'm here, I'm working, I enjoy it. I stay out of trouble. When I leave, I get bored and wonder, what do I do now?

Tom Wiley - who has worked with YEP as a construction supervisor for 13 months - has watched students grow and mature. He has dreams of expanding the program to help the young people more.

"We're always helping out so many other countries, and that's fine, but I'd like to see some of that money come into this community to give these young adults full-time jobs, to set up apprenticeship programs with just a fraction of the money," Wiley said. "It would be nice if there was a next phase after these construction projects, how to go to the next level in construction; we could buy more houses, hire more trainers, give students more time to learn a trade. Even provide enough income to keep them in training for at least a year or two."

#### Call to action

"There are ways the community can help YEP," says Gaylon Parsons. "We are looking for donations for our Summer Jobs program right now.

She adds that "\$1,250 directly supports one Oakland teen's summer job. It's an excellent prevention strategy in a summer when youth unemployment is likely to be extremely high again. And we are always looking for 'living classrooms' and other [donations](#).

For more information, call (510) 533-3447.

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#### About D. Jean Collins



D. Jean Collins is a freelance writer based in Oakland. She loves story telling, so she enjoys interviewing people about what they do and why they do it. Her interests include arts and artists, small businesses, spirituality and community empowerment. D. Jean Collins has worked as writer, editor and proofreader for a variety of publications and established her own company, Black Lotus Enterprises (d.b.a. Black Lotus Editorial Support Services) to provide those services to other writers and artists. She was awarded the Frances E. Williams Artists' Grant in 2005. Her articles, interviews and essays have