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Training 'opened a whole new world'



Gov. Deval Patrick, seated at left, visits JFY Networks while touring a green job-training program at the Wannalancit Mills in Lowell yesterday. Here he chats with student Andre Carter of Lowell.

SUN/DAVID BROW

By Dennis Shaughnessey
dshaughnessey@lowellsun.com

LOWELL — Gov. Deval Patrick wanted to see firsthand how his money was being spent.

On a visit yesterday to JFY NetWorks, a Boston-based nonprofit job training firm that recently won a \$200,000 grant from the state, Patrick was treated to a weatherization demonstration conducted by instructor Steve Carr, JFY's Building Science Trainer. The

governor poked good-natured fun at Carr's Maine roots, but asked all the right questions during the demonstration.

But Patrick's main reason for visiting the training center, located inside the Wannalancit Mills complex on Suffolk Street, was to speak with the beneficiaries of the program. People like 32-year-old Greg Nigro, of Haverill, a former self-employed con-

tractor who told the governor that the 300 hrs of training he received was of "immeasurable value."

"As far as the amount of information that has been provided and the quality of training we've received, you can't quantify it," said Nigro, who read about the program in a press release, and applied for one of 20 available spots and will be ready for certification

in the next several weeks.

"Do these new skills become part of your job as a contractor?" Patrick asked.

Nigro said he will try to hook up with a reputable company in the weatherization or thermal-imaging industry.

"I want to use the training I've received here to help out an existing company that is going in this direction," Nigro said.

Patrick, accompanied by an entourage of state and local officials, as well as representatives from UMass Lowell, which operates the Center for Family, Work and Community in the same building, patiently listened to story after story from grown men who were forced by the struggling economy to reassess their options and sign up for the JFY program. Men like Bob LaMonte, a 54-year-old truck driver from Tewksbury who is about to complete the training course this month.

"This has been more than I ever could have expected," said Lamonte, who learned about the program from a story that ran in *The Sun*. "What Steve (Carr) has taught me has opened up a whole new world. There is a lot of science involved and I wasn't sure I would get it all, but now that I have, I hope I can go far in this field."

JFY Executive Director Gary Kaplan helped Patrick understand the application process that began with more than 100 applicants and was whittled down to 20 for the 14-week course.

"We started with 20 and we finished with 20," Kaplan said. "The program is no good for either party if you're not serious about job training. Some of the people that

applied were obviously not serious. It's a work-training program. You show up on time every day, just as you would for any job. You apply yourself, work hard and you'll do fine."

Patrick shook hands with students and staff members and posed for pictures. Commenting on his visit on the way out the door, Patrick told *The Sun*, "It's nice to see people making the most of the investment dollars we were able to get to them, and in the case of JFY and UMass Lowell, we knew they would."

It's been Patrick's desire, he said, to visit as many places as possible where job-training investments are paying off. Investment money from the stimulus bill targeting workforce training and weatherization collide in just the right combination at the Wanalancit Mills complex, he said.

"Sometimes people see these things in the abstract," Patrick said. "They see numbers but they don't see the faces and the real-life experiences and opportunities behind the programs. These people now have new opportunities, new skills and new possibilities in front of them. They have a confidence about the future that comes from the fact that they, as well as we, are investing in that future."