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## Are You Building a Career or a Legacy?

*Careers in Colorado's Construction Industry Spur Building More*

Che Derrera believes he's been given an opportunity to make a positive lasting impact and he's prepared to do that. First, he had to find a job.

A friend of Derrera's told him about an upcoming Hiring Fair for the [Central 70 Project](#). Derrera's grandfather and uncle [both now retired] worked for Sturgeon Electric Company so he thought the Fair was worth looking into. Central 70 partners with local workforce development platform [WORKNOW](#) to prepare and hire workers for Interstate 70's reconstruction. The one-year-old employment platform provides job placement assistance, career counseling, and equipment and skills training for jobs in the Denver metro construction industry. Derrera filled out a WORKNOW Interest Form on the spot.

Also while at the Hiring Fair, Derrera met representatives from [CORE Partner](#) the Denver Area Labor Federation (DALF) who suggested he apply for the apprenticeship program. So he did. Derrera then paid his dues, bought tools and work boots with cost assistance from WORKNOW and DALF. The hiring process - from attending the Hiring Fair to celebrating Derrera's first day on the job - lasted 28 days.

"Che's success story, helping him find a career, not just a job, is exactly why the [Denver Area Labor Federation](#) is so excited to be a partner in the WORKNOW collaborative," said Madison Cassel, Community Outreach Director for DALF. She went on to share, "WORKNOW is a collective impact partnership where all the Colorado Resources Partners [including DALF] are working to make our community better by empowering families with income and opportunity growth."

Derrera is now working on Central 70 as a Groundsman and Traffic Signal Technician Apprentice for [Sturgeon](#). As a Groundsman, Derrera's workdays vary from one day to the next as he installs traffic signals, wiring, erects temporary lighting, and digs trenches. This is the first year of his three-year apprenticeship program and Derrera loves every bit of it.

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“There’s a physical aspect to the job, though it’s a very mental job as well,” said Derrera. “I love putting pieces together, the analytical aspect of the job,” he continued.

Construction needs a lot more workers that share Derrera’s passion. Statewide unemployment is at an all-time low. Demand for skilled employees is high as Colorado continues to ride the economic boom of the past few years. The U.S. Department of Labor recently reported that as of Nov. 2018, 170,900 people in Colorado worked in construction. Workers’ average hourly wage was \$30.10, an increase from \$28.34 in 2017.”<sup>1</sup> Yet 85% of Colorado contractors say they have a hard time hiring qualified workers.

WORKNOW and CORE seek to prepare more workers to meet industry needs and create better access to good jobs and career paths.

“While unemployment is low in Denver metro, rates of unemployment are substantially higher in some Denver metro neighborhoods,” said Katrina Wert, Executive Director at the Center for Workforce Initiatives at the Community College of Denver. “We know that construction industry jobs, particularly on public projects, offer high-wage, high-growth pathways, and we believe that raising family income is one component to sustaining families.”

WORKNOW offers a host of trainings, workshops, networking, and mentoring opportunities to its Members, through a network of instructional and resource partners. Enrollment in WORKNOW and the services offered are all free of charge thanks to founding and funding partners Gary Community Investments, the Center for Workforce Initiatives at Community College of Denver, the Colorado Department of Transportation, and the City and County of Denver (Office of Economic Development/Denver Workforce Services).

Prior to connecting with WORKNOW, Derrera experienced several tough years. In 2001, his father passed away. At the time, Derrera was in college, going through a divorce, and in a custody battle over his daughter. The stress was insurmountable and seeking relief, Derrera developed a substance use disorder. He got into some trouble

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.denverpost.com/2019/01/03/colorado-construction-labor-shortages/>



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and in 2003, was in prison. During that time and every day thereafter, Derrera reminds himself how life's good and bad moments proudly shape who he is today.

Appreciative of these new opportunities, Derrera sees this as his time to give back and to begin building his legacy. Leaving a legacy requires a mindful responsibility to serve one's own advancement by serving others. Derrera's role on the Central 70 project crew is the first step in building a lasting legacy.

"I enjoy improving the roadways and landscape along Central 70," said Derrera. "This is a positive change for future generations and I'm proud to contribute to that."

Now four months on the job, Derrera's fervor for knowledge and success is still going strong. He's focused on doing today's task and learning as much possible on the job site, which keeps Derrera challenged and engaged every day. He plans to complete the apprenticeship, obtain his certification for project management, and earn his bachelor's degree in human services.

"What I love most about working in construction is the opportunity," said Derrera. "There's so much I can learn that can open doors for me anywhere, even within the same company."

Giving back to the organizations that helped Derrera get to this point is a priority. He is interested in serving as a WORKNOW ambassador and mentor; as well as a community representative for the Electrical Workers Minority Caucus.

To create a legacy is to make a lasting impact that will guide future generations in family and the community. Derrera went to prison when his daughter was just two years old. Today, she is 18 years old. He describes the father-daughter relationship as always having been close, but not always great. Now, they are closer than ever.

"I want to serve as a role model. Talking to her about personal things, sharing lessons I learned the hard way, and simply being there for her...we've gotten so close," said Derrera.

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A legacy lives on through people, not just accomplishments. Derrera prioritizes time with his family and girlfriend while investing extra time to get to know his Central 70 construction crew. He arrives at work 20-30 minutes early every day to take advantage of one-on-one time with his co-workers.

“The camaraderie on the job site is awesome,” said Derrera. “I appreciate people being open-minded about who I am and have an unbiased opinion of me is uplifting. I feel like I belong,” Derrera went on to say.

To see if you belong in a construction career, RSVP to attend a WORKNOW Information Session by calling 720-352-6019 or submit an Interest Form online at [worknow.org](http://worknow.org). WORKNOW helps you build more.

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