

From the Birmingham Business Journal:

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## Why Mark Martin started Build UP in Ensley and how it will help Birmingham businesses

Sep 7, 2018, 10:29am CDT



Submitted by Mark Martin

Mark Martin is leading the nonprofit Build UP.

New nonprofit Build UP is rejuvenating Ensley one home, and one child at a time, and its founder and leader, [Mark Martin](#), sat down with the BBJ to talk more about its long-term impact in Birmingham and beyond.

The program, which currently has 20 children in both an academic and occupational setting, culminates with each child earning a high school diploma and associate degree and having six years of construction experience.

“It’s a big commitment,” Martin said. “This summer we ran a boot camp to expose the kids to the hard work and summer sun. It’s not easy. It’s a really long day. Some kids want to play sports, be in the band, and we just don’t have those things. Our school day is 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and we’re asking for a six-year commitment. We move a little slower and they need to learn how to build homes first before we release them to go build homes.”

About 50 kids have applied to the program so far, and plans are for 20 to be accepted each year. [Read more about the program here.](#)

### **Why did you choose Ensley first?**

I first came here in June 2017 and did Asset Mapping. I asked about 40 residents across Ensley what they think about their community, what's going well. I fell in love with the community and the hopefulness and optimism around both how they know what Ensley was, and what it can become once again. The downtown area has incredible potential – it was once a thriving area. The homes have a ton of character, and because we have such aspirations of taking Build UP nationally and being in as many inner-cities that need us there and want us there, we wanted to start somewhere that needed a jolt from within. If our young people can be as successful as we think they can, and start turning around housing values and stabilizing the community, then there's no doubt we can be successful in Norwood or Avondale or across the country.

### **What does the Birmingham business community need to know about what you're doing and why it should be important to them?**

We feel like we have a real value proposition for every company that is out there, mostly in the financial industry and in the building, construction and real estate trades, because, A: there are a lot of baby boomers retiring off in those industries. There are more positions open than workers able to fill them, and a lot of young people are not going in that direction naturally. B: they know now that they need to diversify and add more females in the construction industry and people of color. That's our bread and butter. It's not about creating entry-level jobs. Our kids are going to have six years of work experience, so they are going to be the future foremen and superintendents of a lot of these companies. Brasfield & Gorrie has been a great supporter of us, and we've had conversations with others. They've helped financially, provided the hard hats, personal protective equipment. Not only that, but they are training all of our kids to be OSHA 10 certified.

### **How does this make a difference in the current educational system?**

One of the major concepts behind Build UP is schools in general have put too much of a burden on producing the future workforce and future citizens on teachers' shoulders. A lot of our teachers are already overwhelmed. They have not necessarily been outside in the workforce aside from schools. Who better to prepare our kids than people who are holding those jobs – experts in their field? Also, Brassfield & Gorrie has a complete site safety team on staff, so why would we have our teachers go get certified to teach safety when this is what they do for a living? We are decoupling the many, many, tasks educators are tasked with.

### **Do you think this will facilitate change in the community and education system?**

If they want different outcomes for education in this community, then they need to try different things. We're not just talking about incremental changes. We're talking about transformational change, and to do that we need to do things very differently, not just tweaking the old model. The interesting thing about what we're doing is there is no single part of it is all that innovative. A lot of it — the apprenticeship learning, vocational education — it was the way that we taught a

lot of young people in this country 50, 60, 70 years ago. That's the oldest form of learning, and we've gotten away from that. It's tended to be stigmatized. You learn a lot about the world through the world of work, and if you're going to be a homeowner you need to know how to do this stuff, or at least know how to make an informed decision on whether or not you want to fix a plumbing leak yourself or call a plumber. What you don't want is to get taken to the woodshed by someone who knows you're incompetent when it comes to those things. We're trying to prepare our young people to be informed, enabled leaders.

### **What do you hope this program will bring to the children and the community?**

This program is about empowerment. It's not about handing anyone anything, giving away anything. It's about teaching our young people about hard work. It's about teaching them to value their community and be a change-maker in the community. Giving them the tools — literally and figuratively — to bring about change. Also, talking to them a whole lot about the reality of their situation of being young, being black in Birmingham. Beyond that — young, poor, in Birmingham. But how they as future leaders can change that for themselves and for others.



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