

## From an ugly incident to ‘a beautiful thing’

By: [Josh Kulla](#) in [Construction](#), [Scrolling Box](#) March 16, 2021 12:29 pm



### JOBSITE CULTURE PLEDGE

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Transformation of an industry’s culture is a herculean task.

But **Andersen Construction** CEO Joel Andersen believes the construction industry can become one that rejects racism and discrimination, even if it takes a generation to do so fully. In Portland, that laborious process began with the launch of [“Safe from Hate”](#) – a contractor-led initiative developed in response to an [incident on an Andersen Construction jobsite](#) in which a rope noose was found hanging conspicuously.

Almost three weeks passed before Andersen Construction executives even became aware of the incident after it was reported. But then Andersen and others were spurred to seriously tackle the racism on jobsites that has been all too prevalent for far too long.

“We realize we have to do something to help try and transform our industry,” Andersen said. “If we keep doing what we’re doing, not only is nothing going to change – there is a good chance it gets worse.”

After the Metropolitan Alliance for Workforce Equity (**MAWE**), Oregon Tradeswomen, the National Association of Minority Contractors’ Oregon chapter (**NAMC**), the Urban League of Portland and other groups called for the contractor to explain what happened, Andersen realized there was an opportunity to do more than that.

“Everyone was hurt and frustrated, and rightfully so,” Andersen said. “But they were like, ‘Yes, we are absolutely willing to do something to make it better.’”

### **A rapid response**

The **Safe from Hate** campaign quickly attracted a wide variety of groups, including those involved in advocacy, the public sector, trade unions, designers and of course contractors and subcontractors. These groups have [continued to meet](#) for several months and reached agreement



on four central pillars: 1, zero tolerance for discrimination; 2, education; 3, recruitment; and 4, advancement.

“They documented their commitment as owners, and all of this has really built momentum,” said Kelly Haines, a senior project manager with **Worksystems** and a MAWE representative. “We met every few weeks from that incident and we coauthored the pledge. From there, we know that’s just words on paper. So, to hold people true to that commitment, that’s what the alliance is meant to be – the implementation and the accountability.”

Then participants realized that such a large group needed to become smaller ones in order to foster more efficient communication. A steering committee was formed to oversee subcommittees comprised of apprentices, public owners, a labor caucus, subcontractors, trade associations, contractors, pre-apprenticeship training programs, public agencies and community-based organizations. The steering committee held its first meeting Feb. 4 and will continue on a monthly basis.

In addition, an executive council comprised of labor representatives will oversee the steering committee. This will also help guide future training and anti-discrimination efforts on the labor side.

“Everyone felt that those most impacted by jobsite culture needed to be leaders in that work,” Haines said. “So, everyone is essentially reporting back to that council. That’s the goal – to be a friendly competition, where everyone comes together and shares what they’re doing and coordinating.”

The **Associated General Contractors’** Oregon-Columbia chapter is serving alongside NAMC Oregon as a shepherd of sorts, providing guidance to help advance the entire process.

“The generals (contractors) ... want to do the work individually to their companies, but they are looking at how you pull together as a structure, and that’s why they’re looking to us,” AGC Executive Director Mike Salsgiver said.

But there are no illusions that the work will be easy.

“I think even when you start to really think about what got us here, it was the noose,” said Nate McCoy, executive director of NAMC Oregon. “But what’s a bigger issue is the bias on the jobsites and who should be here and who shouldn’t.”

### **Building momentum**

Jobsite racism affects Latinos as much as any other minority group. Further, they now represent around 30 percent of the construction workforce – a proportion that is growing.

“It’s always there,” said Leanna Petrone, executive director of trade association **LatinoBuilt**. “Discrimination and hateful acts against our community have been a huge barrier for Latinos.”

Incidents such as the noose are just the tip of the iceberg, Petrone said.

“There’s been a lot through the years, and it’s been this way as long as I can remember,” she said. “My father worked in trades, and he worked in a field, and it’s always been a segregated work environment. The white males tend to stick with their own kind. The women tend to stick with their own. The Latinos, generally men, stick with their own kind. They’re not really included.”

Safe from Hate is by no means the first attempt to address racism in the industry, McCoy said. The difference now is that participation is widespread.

“There have been many decades of conversation around this subject,” he said. “It’s just now the larger GCs are diving into it, which is totally what we want; we want to operate together.”

Haines, **Oregon Tradeswomen** Executive Director Kelly Kupcak and other industry figures have been working for some time to also implement Rise Up, Green Dot and other programs that aim to eliminate harassment and discrimination on jobsites. Safe from Hate simply builds upon those efforts, said Afton Walsh, community outreach director for Walsh Construction.

“This was in the works even before Safe from Hate,” she said. “So, to say this all started in June is wrong. There has been a lot of groundwork and a lot of work that the community has been doing for a long time.”

This process informed how Safe from Hate took shape, Walsh added.

“We spent months working on the language to make sure it was broad,” she said. “Each company has ways to implement these broader principles. We wanted everyone to join in the journey wherever they are, so it works for nonunion, union, large or small contractors. Everyone can use these as guiding principles to find where they fit in.”

### **Essentially safety**

Kupcak said she and others have been in communication with the **Oregon Bureau of Labor & Industries** about harassment on jobsites for some time. She hopes to eventually see enactment of regulations that treat discrimination as a formal health and safety issue enforceable by **Oregon Occupational Safety and Health**.

“We have shifted the way we approach it as an intervention,” she said. “OSHA convened a task force a couple of years ago about harassment, and we are part of that conversation. Not only do we lose really good people – they love their jobs; they just don’t want to deal with it day after day – but people have died.”

A quarter of a century ago, safety began to become an everyday focus for contractors and clients, Andersen said. It was a slow process, but one aided by acknowledgment that it benefited the entire industry. The effort to eradicate racism and discrimination is no different, he said.

“That was a vernacular that was easily understood; it’s part of the everyday DNA of every jobsite,” he said. “The idea to build upon that with the campaign of Safe from Hate was to say let’s just include that in the definition of safety.”

There is no question that discrimination in construction is fundamentally a matter of health and safety, according to parties involved in the Safe from Hate effort.

“It is absolutely a safety issue,” said Michael Burch, the community relations and outreach representative for the **Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters**, which represents over 28,000 union carpenters in Oregon, Washington and four other states. “But it goes deeper than that.”

### **Beneath the surface**

A crackdown on graffiti and casual use of racist language is just a start, Burch said. A broader effort must be made to recruit and retain people of color and women in the trades, he added.

“Instead of hiring folks and letting them languish out there, (firms’ leaders) need to be intentional about the leadership paths they put them on,” he said. “There’s a problem with porta potties and lunchrooms, but that’s low-hanging fruit, and we can do that. It’s a problem when you walk onto a construction site and there are 100 workers and they are all white males.”

Changing that is not only the right thing to do, Burch added, but also good for business. The Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters implemented positive jobsite culture training some time ago, and Safe from Hate fits neatly within those parameters. The goal is to strengthen the workforce and increase the flow of skilled labor to contractors and jobsites.

“We talked to the apprentices about whether or not they would go back to work tomorrow and asked if they would enjoy it, and most said no, they go for the paycheck,” Burch said. “We spent 18 months developing this curriculum. It’s in the safety class, which all apprentices take, and it’s a training that goes to jobsites.”

The carpenters’ union has even made this training mandatory at its jobsites. Some members have participated multiple times.

“It works for a while, but it’s a marathon, because our work is transient,” Burch said. “They are on the site when the training happens; (then) their work ends and they are off to other areas, and it’s right back to business as usual. So, you have to continue to water those seeds that you planted.”

History shows organized labor is strongest, Burch added, when everyone – “Black, brown, BIPOC folks” – comes together.

“It keeps being pointed out that the industry is weaker because of the divisions, and we’ve done quite a bit of work in that area,” he said.

### **Optimism for change**

In the end, this is only a start to what promises to be a long and potentially frustrating process. But in Portland, at least, a tipping point may have finally been reached.

“We are just beginning, but, man, does it feel exciting to be where we are,” Andersen said. “I say that with this mixture of ‘Here I am, a white guy pumped about what we’re doing.’ But the part that sickens me is, for so many of our peers in the industry and those who have found themselves not welcome, this has been their life’s existence. And we haven’t done enough.”

Open acknowledgment of the problem is encouraging, McCoy said.

“It’s a marathon and not a sprint, and some may not be as equipped or have the systems in place to wrestle with this reality that there is racism and discrimination, big time,” he said. “This is not the first attempt at this, but typically we don’t have the top dogs using their time in the room and saying, ‘It starts with us.’ Now we’ve got that commitment, and it’s a beautiful thing.”

Already, there are signs of progress. Haines noted that several months after the noose was discovered at the Andersen Construction jobsite, a similar incident occurred at a **Hoffman Construction** jobsite. This time, there was a much more serious response. It was treated like a crime scene, she said, and the person found responsible was removed from the project immediately and disciplined.

“Part of the work is we don’t want to sweep it under the rug, and we found that Hoffman reacted night and day differently than Andersen,” she said. “They shut the site down, called the police, and we have tried to share that example. It was a painter, and the union wrote a letter right away and said they won’t defend members who engaged in this behavior. It was a coordinated effort and transparent.”

That’s why Petrone and others are optimistic.

“I’m not sure it will take 30 years to really shift the way we think of our current jobsite culture here,” she said. “I think it can be done. It might take a Coca-Cola ad, but we’ve already seen awareness and change come in this short period of time.”

After all, it’s about working for a better industry.

“It can’t just take people that look like us,” said Twauna Hennessee, who will soon take over Burch’s position at the Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters. “We need everyone not being afraid to speak truth and putting action behind what we hear.”



## Groups launch bilingual safety video series

By: [Alex Jensen](#) in [Construction](#) February 24, 2021 4:01 pm

A new bilingual safety campaign is being presented by **LatinoBuilt** and **SafeBuild Alliance** in an effort to support the construction industry's Spanish-speaking population.

**Safety Starts Here** will provide videos in English and Spanish on safety-related topics such as personal protective equipment for power tools, ladder safety and fall protection.

“Latinx construction workers represent more than 30 percent nationwide and approximately 14 percent across the Portland-metro area construction workforce, according to Metro, yet safety information is often only available in English,” stated Rosa Martinez, board president of LatinoBuilt.

The nonprofit was founded in 2019 to improve opportunities for Latino-owned construction businesses in Oregon.

Leanna Petrone, LatinoBuilt's executive director, said a campaign like Safety Starts Here is why the organization was formed. Much of the Latino community's trust comes via relationships, she added.

“LatinoBuilt is that trusted family member for anybody in the Latino community,” she said.

LatinoBuilt, SafeBuild Alliance and **Associated General Contractors** are teaming up to get the videos out to as many general contractors as they can, Petrone said.

The campaign was made possible by a grant from Oregon OSHA. Visit [www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJQOeCPG2NU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJQOeCPG2NU) to learn more.

## How much wood could the market absorb? A lot more

By: [Alex Jensen](#) in [Construction](#), [Scrolling Box](#) April 9, 2021 3:10 pm



*A forklift operator moves lumber at the Milwaukie Lumber Co. store in southeast Milwaukie. Lumber prices are reportedly skyrocketing because of high demand and inadequate supply. (Alex Jensen/DJC)*

While construction remains a bright spot for the U.S. economy during the pandemic, soaring costs and shortages of materials are creating havoc for companies across the country. This is especially true of lumber.

**LMC Construction** Vice President Kyle Anderson said he'd seen a 40 percent increase in material prices over the past couple of months. For one recent \$2 million project in North Portland, he said, from the time the contract was awarded to the time of procurement, the cost of materials jumped to \$430,000.

“We’ve dealt with material inflation and supply shortages before, but nothing like this – this drastic in a short period of time,” he said. “I’m hearing that message pretty consistently with subcontractors and with wood suppliers.”

**Idaho Pacific Lumber Company**, a leading supplier for multifamily construction, routinely releases market reports. In the Pacific Northwest, the cost of a 4-by-8 sheet of 15/32 Oriented Strand Board (OSB) has risen from \$395 last year to \$1,550, said Scott Sunday, vice president of purchasing and sales for Idaho Pacific Lumber.

“Lumber has more than doubled in price, panels quadrupled, and OSB quadrupled,” he said.

Project teams across the country are stopping work, Sunday said, because they can’t find the materials they need. Items ranging from metal fasteners to dishwashers are becoming scarce. But nothing is causing more concern than lumber.

Just before talking with the DJC, **Walsh Construction** senior project manager Ed Sloop had spoken with someone about how to deal with lumber – it was his fourth call of the week on the subject.

Sloop, Walsh Construction’s chief estimator, has been watching the market particularly close for the past several months trying to determine the best time to buy materials or, more frequently, how to account for a project’s cost with escalating prices.

“It’s just gone crazy,” he said of lumber. “That is the single biggest impact to us.”

### **How did we get here?**

The **Associated General Contractors of America** last month released a survey on the impacts of COVID-19 on the construction industry. Results showed that backlogs and shutdowns at factories, mills and fabrication facilities – both domestically and internationally – are causing the majority of the supply issues.

While many manufacturing facilities and mills responded to the pandemic like a recession was imminent, Sunday said, builders for the most part did not. There was a slight pause early on, but then construction was deemed an essential business and work picked up again. This led to pent-up demand for materials such as lumber, Sunday said.

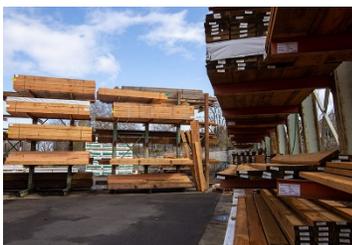
Even after factories and mills resumed operations, COVID-19 case counts led to some pausing again. Suppliers couldn’t catch up.

At the same time, the single-family market started booming – and the home improvement market ramped up. Even greater pressure was placed on supply.

Historically, single-housing construction has significantly impacted supply of lumber. But in 2006, the market fell off a cliff. According to Trading Economics, housing starts dropped from a little over 2.1 million in 2006 to under 750,000 in 2008 – an approximately 65 percent drop.

But single-family construction has since recovered slowly, and that trend became even more apparent entering 2020, Sunday said.

Then COVID-19 arrived. The pandemic shocked producers, but not builders. Demand for lumber failed to wane.



*Rising lumber prices are affecting construction projects in Portland and elsewhere. (Alex Jensen/DJC)*

It wasn’t always that way, said Steve “Tiny” Morlock, a counter crew leader for **Milwaukie Lumber Co.** who has been in the industry 30 years. In 2007-08, he said, there was a glut of lumber and not enough demand, which led to a number of mills closing down.

Now those mills that remain can’t produce enough.

“The single-housing market combined with certain factories or mills being affected by COVID shutdowns ... Those two items together combined then created a perfect storm,” Anderson said.

Then in late summer 2020, the lumber supply caught fire ... literally.

### **Disastrous consequences**

In a letter to Idaho Pacific Lumber customers in mid-March, Sunday wrote: “In regard to lumber, the results of the 2020 forest fires last September in the western United States had a (devastating) effect on the industry. It was reported the Oregon alone lost 15 billion board feet of timber, enough to build a million homes. The amount of logging equipment lost in these fires is in the hundreds of millions of dollars.”

The loss of that amount of lumber – as well as equipment – due to the fires has been “catastrophic to the lumber market,” Sunday said. It “all added to this terrible situation that we’re in and being so undersupplied.”

While the coronavirus has disrupted job sites, the volatility of the lumber market could have a more devastating effect, Sunday said.

“(It’s as) bad as it could possibly get,” he said. “If we get another fire season, it’ll truly cripple the industry.”

LMC Construction in the past could procure lumber for projects in two to three weeks, Anderson said. Now it’s closer to six to eight weeks, he said, adding that he’s definitely worried about the schedule for any project getting out of the ground and heading toward framing.

Walsh’s Sloop has similar concerns.

“When you’ve been told, ‘Hey you can’t have doors until after you’re supposed to have occupancy,’ that’s a problem,” he said.

Project start and end times are all daisy-chained, Sloop added, and at some point, subcontractors will have to send their people to the next job. Unfortunately, delayed deliveries of materials could lead some contractors to turn to weekends to get work done on time, he said.

### **Where are we headed?**

Both Sunday, who has 36 years in the industry, and Anderson, who has 24, said they’ve never seen lumber market volatility like what is happening now. And change might not come for some time.

“We’re expecting the remainder of 2021 to be turbulent on that front (lumber),” Anderson said. “Having any kind of shutdown on already ... a strained market is going to make things worse.”

For the lumber market to normalize, it needs either a substantial infusion of supply (unlikely anytime soon, according to Sunday) or a decrease in demand – perhaps because of projects being put on hold.

Delaying projects would be a dangerous game to play, especially amid market volatility, Anderson said. He would prefer to see project teams simply account for cost increases.

Meanwhile, as COVID-19 vaccinations take place and mill shutdowns cease, supply might be able to catch up.

Morlock, of Milwaukie Lumber Co., said he's seen logs at mills waiting to be processed. However, he added that even if operators were to work 24 hours a day, only so many logs can be processed at a time.

"I think we're going to be in this kind of pricing into 2022 and maybe well into 2022 before seeing any type of release," Sunday said.

# The Register-Guard

## 'Hard working, authentic, smart and humble': Jim Wildish remembered

[Matthew Denis](#) [Michelle Maxwell](#)

Register-Guard

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*Jim Wildish, CEO and president of the Wildish Land Co., in August of 2017. Wildish Family*

Family, friends and colleagues remembered James Wildish, president and CEO of Wildish Land Co., as a successful business owner whose dedicated community and civic involvement resonated through his personal and professional life. He died Jan. 24 at 89 years old.

Wildish spent virtually his entire life in Eugene. He was the 10th of 12 children born to the Wildish family before it moved to Eugene from tiny Rock Lake, North Dakota, in 1934.

His father, Thomas C. Wildish, established the trucking company during the Great Depression that grew into the Wildish Land Co., a family-owned construction company that now employs about 350 people throughout the Northwest. Wildish worked his way up the company ladder, becoming president and CEO in 1991.

“Things were a little bit difficult at that time,” Wildish told The Register-Guard in 2009, “but we had family here so my dad started the business — I think in January 1935 — with one truck.”

“Basically, a contractor was doing the highway between Eugene and Junction City, when that was first built,” Wildish says. “And he had an opportunity to get that truck and get some work.”

### Working his way up

Wildish learned this family business from the ground up, his family said in a tribute, beginning first at 18, running a loader in the yard.

The business grew as Wildish's father added different businesses to eliminate the need for subcontractors, Wildish said in the interview. Wildish Land Co. grew to include all elements of road construction — sand and gravel, concrete and asphalt operations — and in the 1960s, a building construction arm was added.

The Wildish companies have done much of the southern Willamette Valley's construction work over the years. Projects include hundreds of miles of roads, much of the Eugene Airport, the Lane Transit District's Downtown Station and expansions of both Eugene's Autzen Stadium and Corvallis' Reser Stadium.

"Jim helped build a highly successful company while maintaining the respect of his employees, clients, and competitors," explained John Hickey, executive director of Asphalt Pavement Association of Oregon.

"I suspect that most people think about Jim in the exact same way – hard working, authentic, smart and humble. That consistency and positivity are rare and inspiring."

Another one of his colleagues, Steve Hanson with Ward Insurance, agreed. "Jim was one of the most humble, down-to-earth 'good folks' I've ever had the honor and pleasure of calling a friend," Hanson said.

Wildish's family was a central part of his life, as anyone who visited his office could tell from the countless photos on the walls. Married 68 years, Jim and Yvonne Wildish have two adult sons, Mike and Steve. Both sons work in the family business and are actively involved in day-to-day operations.

"Jim was the rare individual who was able to balance being a dedicated family man, a conscientious and successful businessman, a tireless community leader and an extraordinarily kind and generous human being," Greg Erwin, Sapien Private Wealth Management CEO and Oregon21 Steering Committee co-chair, said in a statement.

Scott Williams, Chairman of Hamilton Construction, said when Wildish spoke, people listened.

"I have the utmost respect for how he ran his company, treated his employees and gave back to the community," Williams said. "Hamilton and Wildish partnered on several projects and often we did business on a handshake. Jim's word was his bond, and he never broke it."

Wildish valued attention to detail and employee safety, his family said, and was nationally awarded for safety practices. Wildish's leadership in the industry was acknowledged with lifetime achievement awards from the Associated General Contractors of Oregon in 2008, the Asphalt Pavement Association of Oregon in 2016 and from the Oregon Concrete & Aggregate Producers Association in 2018.

## **Sweat equity and financial contributions**

Outside of professional life, Wildish was recognized for his community service. His company has contributed money or volunteer efforts to more than 100 local organizations. Wildish showed his support not only with money, but with his time and energy.

"My parents were very big on giving back to the community," Wildish explained to The Register-Guard in 2004. "It's an old cliché, but it's true. When you live in one area a long time you have an obligation."

In 2004, Wildish was named First Citizen by the Eugene Area Chamber of Commerce. He described himself as an involved but low-key community activist.

"I've always been one who tried to operate under the radar screen," Wildish told The Register-Guard after earning the honor. "So (receiving the award) is a little bit humbling, to say the least.

"The different people who've won that award, I always considered to be well-deserving," he said. "To be in that company has got to be humbling."

Wildish's service to the Oregon Trail Council of the Boy Scouts, for example, goes back to his time as a Cub Master in 1963 through landing the Oregon Trail President's Award in 1995.

"No organization could have a more devoted or engaged volunteer than Jim Wildish," Scott Impehoven, scout executive of the Oregon Trail Council, Boy Scouts of America, said in a statement. "

A loyal Rotarian, Wildish gave countless hours to Delta Rotary projects including the Owen Rose Garden, ShelterBox, Delta Ponds, and helping launch Looking Glass' Station 7.

In December, he was given the Quiet Rotarian award.

"I saw this award, and immediately thought of Jim. He is so generous, but not boastful. He helps from behind the scenes," said Kim Meyers, Delta Rotary president.

Rotarian Mike Hartwig recalled working with Wildish, laying paver stones at the Owen Rose Garden when the pergola path was put in.

"Jim not only provided the sand and pavers, but he was also on his knees installing them," Hartwig said. "One can learn a lot spending a day on hands and knees with another person. (Wildish) was the guy who was there early with the coffee and donuts."

Wildish and his wife also held a special place in their hearts for the performing arts, including working with Chamber Music Amici, Oregon Bach Festival and Eugene Symphony.

Closest to his heart, his family said, was when the Wildish family helped launch the building of the Richard E. Wildish Community Theatre in Springfield, dedicated to Jim's brother.

“Jim was a caring, decent man who enjoyed what he did and was grateful for all of the good things that resulted from honest, hard work,” said Randy Hledik, retired general services director of Wildish Land Co. “He always made it a point to celebrate successes with those around him. We’ve all lost an exceptional friend.”

No memorial events are currently scheduled. To honor Wildish, the family asks people to have memorial trees planted in a national forest in memory of a loved one.

## The pandemic closed high schools, but these Salem students still get to do their final project: build a house.

Every year, seniors in Salem-Keizer's residential construction program finish their studies by building a house that's sold to a local family. Despite smaller groups and shorter work schedules, they're on track to finish by graduation.

By Rachel Alexander – Salem Reporter  
February 11, 2021 at 2:05pm



*Figure 1* Curtis Fisher, a CTEC construction instructor, works with senior Caleb Susee while building a wall as part of the CTEC residential construction program on Wednesday, Feb. 10. (Amanda Loman/Salem Reporter)

When Salem high schools closed abruptly last March, Reed Hamilton, 18, worried about finishing his classes online.

But the McNary High School senior had another pressing concern: Would he still be able to build a house with his classmates before graduation?

"I've been looking forward to it since my freshman year," he said of the build.

Hamilton is one of 28 seniors in Salem-Keizer's Career Technical Education Center residential construction program, a two-year offering for juniors and seniors who want to spend half their school week learning a trade hands-on.

Juniors in the program learn about design and construction and build sheds at the sprawling campus on Portland Road. Seniors get to put those skills to more practical use, constructing a home from the foundation up. The lot is purchased by Advanced Construction Education, a Salem-based nonprofit organization, which also lines up a contractor to supervise the build and complete some work, like plumbing, that students can't do. Once finished, the house is sold at market rates.

District high schools remain largely closed aside from brief in-person sessions to help struggling students. But on a lot at the end of Apollo Avenue in a northeast Salem subdivision, Hamilton and his classmates have built a foundation, put down sheeting and are raising the walls on an 1,800 square foot home.

Rhonda Rhodes, principal of the Career Technical Education Center, said they've worked hard to get kids hands-on education this year even in the face of Covid health restrictions, which limit the number of students who can be in a classroom.

“You can’t learn to weld in your living room, and you can’t paint a car at your kitchen,” she said.

Since October, students have been able to come to classes for two hours per day, once a week for the hands-on portion of their programs. Normally, they’d be on campus for two full school days weekly.

Seniors in the construction program are spending that time on the job site, building a home.

Ben Ponce, 18, a senior at McKay High School, has worked with his dad on roofing projects for years. He said the promise of building a home led him to choose the construction program over manufacturing, but he remembered thinking it might not happen when his English teacher warned him in mid-March schools might shut down.

“That’s when I was like, ‘Oh dang, I might not get a senior year,’” he said.

In September, he said the class found out they’d get to go ahead as planned.

“I was super excited. It’s hard to teach this on Zoom,” construction instructor Curtis Fisher said.

Normally, Fisher would have 14 students on-site for about three hours daily. Now, he’s restricted to two hours with smaller groups of six to nine students. But despite the challenges, Fisher said the build is on schedule to be finished by the end of the year.

Hamilton is a volunteer firefighter with the Sublimity Fire District and said he’d like to pursue a firefighting career after high school. He likes building things, but said the program is also practical for firefighting.

“It’s good to know how houses are built and usually laid out,” he said.

This week, his class raised the home’s interior walls.

“I love working with my hands and seeing the final outcome,” Hamilton said.

The center, which has 10 programs, is in many ways built for Covid protocols, Rhodes said. Most students wear protective gear of some type because of the nature of their work, and the large campus makes it easier for students to spread out.

The Covid restrictions have posed some additional challenges - Rhodes said it took her three tries to find a mask the district’s risk management office approved for welding students to wear under their hoods, because cloth and surgical masks are both flammable.

They’ve also upgraded to fog-resistant goggles so students’ lenses don’t fog up from wearing a face covering.

“We don’t want them to lose fingers because they can’t see and they’re operating a chop saw,” she said.

**Contact reporter Rachel Alexander: [rachel@salemreporter.com](mailto:rachel@salemreporter.com) or 503-575-1241.**

## What's that? Shuttered Toys 'R' Us building in northeast Salem gets new identity

[Whitney Woodworth](#)

Salem Statesman Journal

Published 11:51 a.m PT Feb. 25, 2021 | Updated 2:25 p.m. PT Feb. 25, 2021

**Project:** Education.

**Location:** 1200 Lancaster Drive NE, Salem.

**Description:** After bankruptcy proceedings left the 47,000-square-foot building housing the Toys "R" Us store on Lancaster Drive in Salem vacant for years, the site is now being reinvented as a career tech academy.

Willamette Career Academy is set to open in fall 2021, offering career and technical education in cosmetology, health services and diesel technology to high school students. Additional courses in construction technology, computer science/information technology and manufacturing technology would be added in fall 2022.

[In its first year](#), the school expects to serve nearly 300 students from 11 districts across Marion, Polk and Yamhill counties. It hopes to grow to about 600 students in year two.

**Indoor dining:** [Which Salem-area restaurants are reopening for indoor dining?](#)

Construction is expected to be completed by April, and the school is accepting applications for its fall programs.

"The Willamette Career Academy will serve as a regional hub for students in Marion, Polk, and Yamhill counties," said Michael Clark, the director of communications for the Willamette Education Service District. "It will provide students with the opportunity to explore and engage in learning high-demand skills in CTE courses."

Clark said the academy is partnering with regional school districts to offer student transportation, class scheduling and course credits as well as with industry partners to provide students with experience, guidance and training.

Johnie Ferro has been hired as the school principal.

"Johnie has years of related experience in the field of career and technical education and truly demonstrates a passion for helping students succeed by harnessing their strengths and talents," Dr. Dave Novotney, the WESD superintendent, said.



Clark said financial contributions are still welcomed to support the cost of the project. More information is available at [wesd.org](http://wesd.org).

In 2018, the closure of nine Toys "R" Us stores in Oregon was announced, including the store in Salem, which was a combined Toys "R" Us and Babies "R" Us.

That year, the property's taxable assessed value was \$4.72 million, according to Marion County property records.

**Read more:** [New career tech academy in Salem to benefit students throughout Oregon](#)

Toys "R" Us held a grand opening for its 42,000-square-foot Salem store in November 1985, according to newspaper archives. The store at the time had 100 employees, though most of them were part-time workers.

The Salem store employed about 45 workers in 2015, Statesman Journal archives show.

After the closure was announced in 2018, the building went on the market and was purchased by MWIC TOYS LLC, a part of Mountain West Investment Corporation, in April 2020.

The property has a taxable assessed valued of \$4.7 million.

The idea and initial funding for the career academy resulted from a private-public partnership between Mountain West Investment Corporation and the Willamette Education Service District.

**More development news:** [What's that new building at Willamette Town Center?](#)

**Estimated size:** 47,000 square feet.

**Project cost:** \$11.2 million, including construction, renovation, land acquisition, architectural support, engineering, equipment and first-year operations costs.

**Source:** Willamette Education Service District.

*Reporting from Natalie Pate is included in this story*