

Rehabbing both homes and lives

Businessmen build on their passions

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As the lack of affordable housing and homeownership continue to plague Milwaukee, two entrepreneurs who came together from different corners of the state are working to reverse those trends.

Ezekiel Community Development Corp. is run by president Don Utech, an entrepreneur in the world of power electronics, and vice president Jim Gaillard, the owner of WHIRE Electrical Services.

The two met at a Milwaukee Inner-city Congregations Allied for Hope event in 2012 when MICAH president the Rev. Willie Brisco introduced them. As they talked, a plan began to form that would work to both of their strengths. The pair wanted to provide local residents and people re-entering society from incarceration with the training and tools needed to rehab Milwaukee's numerous dilapidated vacant homes and sell them to neighborhood residents.

The result?

Ezekiel Community Development Corp., a program that addresses the need for skilled labor and reduces neighborhood blight.

Both Utech and Gaillard had humble origins before forming Ezekiel

Utech grew up on a farm in the small northern Wisconsin town of Elderon. After graduating from Marquette University with a degree in science and electrical engineering, Utech went into power electronics. He spent 20 years at UNICO, eventually becoming the vice president of operations.

Gaillard grew up in Milwaukee near North Fourth Street and East North Avenue. A math whiz, he was recruited to a program called "A Better Chance" that took him to a prep school in Oshkosh. From there, he attended Marquette University, became an electrical apprentice and started his own company. The acronym stands for: We Hire Intelligent Responsible Employees.

After finding business success, both Utech and Gaillard found themselves drawn to social justice.

For Gaillard, it was his own experience that brought him into that space. He said he was nearly fired three times from his apprenticeship, and after graduating and becoming a journeyman, he continued to struggle.

"I've always kind of been a fighter," he said. "I always knew the contracting world was discriminatory and exclusive."

He wanted his business to be different, a door open to at-risk youths and re-entries in need of marketable skills.

That perfectly fit a vision Utech has pursued for years.

In 2012, Utech found himself coordinating a new job resource center at Repairs of the Breach, a daytime homeless shelter.

And when Utech joined MICAH, an organization dedicated to improving criminal justice, housing, economic development and other social programs, he joined the jobs and economic development group.

Utech's history in the industry meant he recognized the discrimination Gaillard had experienced firsthand. When Brisco brought Gaillard in to discuss the lack of minority contractors, the two started brainstorming.

Ezekiel Community Development Corp. was born.

"Our focus today really is creating jobs," Utech said. "We try to train people with a felony, no skills. We'd rather teach them how to fish than give them fish."

Program allows people in House of Correction to gain work, life skills

At Ezekiel, potential candidates often come from places such as Employ Milwaukee. One particular program, Absolute Advantage, allows people at the House of Correction to train in construction on a type of work-release program.

Although Utech and Gaillard are passionate about their work, they admit it's not easy.

"A lot of (times), we're dealing with a mindset of people who have been trampled on and forgotten about for-



Don Utech, left, and Jim Gaillard, right, join Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett in discussing efforts to rehabilitate homes in the Sherman Park area. MARY SPICUZZA / MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL



Site manager Kevin Freeman, left, watches as trainee Otis Thomas Jr. installs recessed lighting.

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About this feature

Each week, we'll be profiling difference-makers in our community. Some may be newsmakers; some may be unsung heroes. We'll talk to them about their motivations and their life journey, and in the process weave a portrait about what it's like to live in this place, at this time. If you have suggestions for subjects, please send them to jsmetro@jrn.com. We'd love to hear from you.



A bathroom renovated by the Ezekiel Community Development Corp. program at a duplex at 2929 N. 26th St.

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ing 40% to 45% of their income toward rent, with late fees and credit lowering due to utility bills. Milwaukee is known for predatory landlords," he said.

The company has rehabbed 30 homes located on the 2900 block of North 26th Street where Ezekiel's offices are located, while another 20 have been rehabbed elsewhere.

Included in that 50 are 10 homes that were rehabbed as part of a 2017 initiative where Ezekiel and five other developers rehabbed more than 100 homes in the greater Sherman Park area.

In a city that has the second-lowest Black homeownership rate (27.2%) among the nation's 50 largest metropolitan areas, Williams said organizations such as Ezekiel are helping make a difference.

"It's upgrading the housing stock in our inner city (and) the fact that they foster homeownership is excellent," Williams said. "For most people, their home is a vehicle for them to get into the middle class. The work that Ezekiel does addresses that."

Ezekiel is one of the development companies that is part of the Community Development Alliance, a Milwaukee-based collaboration between government, community and philanthropic organizations meant to address the needs of low-income renters and racial disparities in homeownership.

Despite their proven successes, the pair said finding funding has been difficult.

"My biggest frustration here is that, I guess when I started, I was naive," Utech said. "I thought: the city would be beating down our doors when they learned what we wanted to do. Most of the time we knock on their door, they don't even answer."

The pair credited Northwestern Mutual for spending roughly \$1 million on the 2900 block where they have done most of their rehabs, and also expressed appreciation for support from Mayor Tom Barrett, the Dominican Center, Legal Aid Society and Local Initiatives Support Corp.

The pair plan to expand and provide even more training in the future, which they said will take more support moving forward.

ever," Gaillard explained.

"A lot of these people have been told, 'You're never going to amount to nothing, you're going to be back in jail.' So we've got to kind of win over their trust and belief that they can do something different with their life and that's hard."

But it's possible, and according to Connor Williams, an economic policy analyst at Milwaukee-based Community Advocates Public Policy Institute, one of the best ways to reduce recidivism.

"I really appreciate Don Utech and Jim Gaillard's sense of mission to provide a door for those who were previously incarcerated," Williams said.

At Ezekiel, people from the House of Correction "gain important work and life skills," he said, "and that fosters a bridge for those individuals once they're released to work in construction."

Williams also noted that Ezekiel's efforts are helping ease the current labor shortage because Gaillard's company is registered as a pre-apprenticeship program.

Just as he endured challenges to complete his apprenticeship program, Gaillard said trainees must have the right mindset to make it through the pre-apprenticeship at WHIRE.

"I'm old-school," Gaillard laughed. "You've got to wake up with that, as (Don) says, that fire in your belly and desire to do better."

Veronda Jackson, the program manager at Ezekiel, is one of those who wanted to do better. After running into trouble at age 18, she became interested in helping re-entries. A part-time job at WHIRE turned into a full-time role at Ezekiel, where she has been for the past three years.

Jackson said one thing she has learned the most from Utech and Gaillard is perseverance.

"They don't stop," she said. "They get one 'no' and they say OK, what's the next thing we can do."

Utech credits much of Ezekiel's ability to engage trainees to Gaillard — once known as "The Professor" in childhood for masterminding his friends' shenanigans — and his teaching acumen. "Jim is a great teacher," Utech said, smiling. "A lot of the kids who come in, they have no hope. After they come out of Jim's program, they have hope that life will be better."

"The majority of folks, when they come out of (the) House of Correction, this is their second chance," he added.

Company has rehabbed 50 homes and counting in Milwaukee

Utech and Gaillard are both the sons of homeowners, so offering homes to longtime renting residents is another step in rebuilding Milwaukee.

"We find a lot of people who are pay-