

CONSTRUCTION AS A PATHWAY FOR ADVANCEMENT

Roy Barrett has been a construction laborer on the CREATE Program's Argo Connections (B9) project in Summit, Illinois since 2019. Roy shared his journey with the CREATE team from the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) sponsored Highway Construction Careers Training Program (HCCTP) to landing a job in construction. With a year of experience under his belt, Roy spoke about his on the job experience, new career trajectory, and advice for those following a similar path or interested in hiring from a training program.



Roy Barrett, Laborer on Argo Connections (B9)

Can you tell me what your first few months on the job were like?

The first few months were kind of slow [for me] in terms of catching up to what they were doing. The work at the time was a little bit advanced, as far as the equipment and tools and whatever they were doing at that time, because prior to that I only had school training.

It sounds like the first few months were getting familiar with the equipment and transitioning from what you learned in school to what it looks like in real life. Were there folks who helped you transition and guide you during that time?

Yeah, I would say it's a team effort. Everybody has their own experience and everybody at one point in time shares their experience or how I'm supposed to do something or just gives me a different way of looking at stuff or doing stuff.

Were there any skills from the training program that you were able to use early on?

Yeah, all the skills from the training program because the same thing that they trained us to do is the same thing that I've got to go to the apprentice program to get trained on. So, everything they trained me on was helpful.

For folks who don't know what they trained you on, can you describe what those things are?

Yeah, basic tool handling, how to use certain tools without hurting yourself, how to lift – which, I think is like the number one injury in construction – back injuries, so they teach you how to lift stuff. Basically how to use the machines, skid-steer, how to actually calculate measurements correctly.

Another question related to the skills – are there any skills from the program that you're still using today?

Yes, they taught me how to use the proper word for measuring, the proper way of measuring stuff and calculating measurements and I use that up to this day. Everything that they taught me at the school I use today. I'm pretty sure I'm going to use it tomorrow too.

What sorts of activities do you do on the job?

Right now, for the most part, we're doing dirt work – so finding grade, digging ditches, digging up loose dirt. Basically, the whole nine yards – everything you would normally do on a construction site.

And, you've gotten to operate some of the equipment, as well?

Yeah, I also operate some of the equipment like the roller, the skid-steer.

Have your activities changed as the project has progressed?

Yeah, most definitely. Last year when I was working, I was basically cleaning up and helping out the guys. But this year, they have given me tasks to complete, you know, like personal tasks for myself. I've had to take care of it and make sure everything is good. As I keep going to the apprentice school and grow in the company, the tasks get bigger, and they trust me more to do certain things by myself. Everything takes time and you got to build a certain kind of relationship, so in the future they can trust me with even bigger stuff.

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Congratulations. That also gets to my next question, but I'll still ask it anyway. Have you learned any new skills since being on the job?

Oh yeah, a lot. That's one of the main things about construction. You have to keep up with it, because if you don't keep up with it, you're going to get left out. Everyday, I learn something new. I've learned how to do stuff in an easier way, a faster way, a more productive way. That's one of the main things because construction is time consuming so if you can find a way to do something easier with less time and less stress, you know, why not?

When you first came on in 2019, did you have a good idea of the work you would be doing right now?

I really didn't have an idea of what I was doing, what I was about to do or what I was getting myself into. It was more that I was open-minded and willing to learn. With that being said, eventually I caught on and started to do stuff their way. You know, you can never be too old to learn. There's always something I don't know or haven't arrived up on yet. So once I get to that bridge, I guess I'll cross it.

What do you think is next for you?

Progression and advancement. I was thinking about that this morning. My next step is to go back to school and try to see if I can elevate myself within construction. So I was thinking about going back to school for construction management. You know, one class a semester until I complete it. I think that would be a good story to tell my kids as they get older.

Has being on a construction site helped you see that career path?

Yeah, to me it's all about elevation. I made a promise to myself a long time ago with everything I do, I always try to advance. And, if I can't advance, then I need to move on to something else. I feel like construction is like that too. You got to advance. Because 10, 20 years from now I don't think I want to go on a construction site

and be lifting up 50 pounds when I'm almost 50 years old, but I would still like to learn, so I got to find another alternative. Now I'm young, my brain is still a little bit spongy, so now is a good time to try to get what I can get.

Putting on your future construction management hat, what advice do you have to the employers who are considering hiring from training programs?

I think it's the way to go because everything is getting advanced and getting modernized and I think this is a modern way. At least before you hire them, you know they did at least 90 to 120 days of construction and have an idea of what to expect of when they get out of there.

Do you have any advice for either someone who is just finishing the program or for people who are basically where you were a year ago?

My advice is if you just finished the program and you're trying to get a job, be patient. That was the first thing. It took me a little while before I actually got in with a construction company, but once you get in they pretty much take care of you and make sure everything is okay. You get hooked up with a good union. You get all the benefits and everything so the first thing is to be patient. The second thing is to pay attention and listen. Somebody always has something to say or they probably have something to show you that might make your life easier. So you know, you can listen, you can take their advice, you don't necessarily have to do it but you still can listen.

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Sounds pretty applicable to many things.

Yeah, I mean construction is just like a lot of stuff you know. You start at the bottom and you build all the way to the top.

Would you mind just telling us a little bit about yourself?

Oh well, you already know my name Roy Barrett. I'm an immigrant from Jamaica. Came over here like six or seven years ago. I decided to go back to school at Dawson to advance myself, try to get in the working world. I went to Dawson for my GED. I realized they had several programs. I went back there to try out their program and the HCCTP actually led to this job. And ever since I've had this job, I've been good.

Is there anything that you wanted to say that I didn't ask?

Just one thing. Back to that question where you asked me what advice I have for new workers. When you do a get a job doing construction, just come prepared because it goes pretty quick. It's very time consuming, so people don't really have a lot of patience. Be on time and pay attention and do it – don't have people have to repeat the same thing to you more than once or even twice. So that's it. When you come on, stay focused. Most construction only lasts for eight hours. So stay focused for eight.

And then you can go off—

Go out and do whatever you want to do after that. These people, they pay you good money. So they want you to be attentive and be on point at all times.

There will be construction job opportunities available on CREATE's 75th Street Corridor Improvement Project. Position yourself to get hired by applying for training through the Highway Construction Careers Training Program at Dawson Technical Institute of Kennedy-King College. For more information, contact Lisa Cockerham 773-487-3692 or email lcockerham2@ccc.edu.



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