

SHOPPING CENTERS TODAY

'Thanks,' say Project REAP's minority grads

BY MOLLY KNIGHT

Being a middle-aged black woman with very little experience in commercial real estate, it's very easy to just get the brush-off," said Karen Drake, a 53-year-old real estate manager for Wal-Mart Stores. "It's the kind of business where people know one another, and they've done many deals over the years. People just don't want to take a chance on someone new."

Drake credits Project REAP (Real Estate Associate Program) with helping her land her coveted position at the world's largest retailer. Established in 1997, Project REAP is a rigorous six-month recruiting program that has trained and placed dozens of talented, educated minority employees (those who finish in the top five of the course) in internships at participating commercial real estate firms. Of those, 30 have been offered permanent positions.

Project REAP is doing the industry as much of a service as it is its participants, organizers say.

"An industry of maybe 100,000 professionals where less than 1,000 are minorities is certainly problematic," said Mike Bush, founder and executive director of Washington, D.C.-based Project REAP, a minority professional development initiative. "So we launched the project to address the issue, and it's been very successful."

According to Bush, REAP is successful in identifying top candidates even leading companies can't find. "Our industry is practically dependent on networking," explained Bush. "We know companies are looking for people, and they know our students who excel in the program are exemplary candidates."

Drake, a graduate of National-Louis University in Chicago, worked in residential real estate for Bell South in Atlanta for 33 years before retiring in 2003. But after

six months away from the daily grind, she says she realized she was too young to be "lying around, planting flowers and playing golf for the rest of my life."

She decided to venture into a second career in big-box development, but she did not know where to begin.



"REAP gave me the nuts and bolts of the business and told me everything I needed to get my foot in the door," says Centeno.

Frustrated with her inability to transition into the industry, she enrolled in REAP's semester evening course at Clark Atlanta University — founded in 2001 — and discovered its offerings and hands-on opportunities were invaluable. "I learned different aspects of the business I never even imagined," said Drake. "Every third week we covered a different subject — from project management to land acquisition to budgeting."

And just as important, says Drake, were the networking events with executives from top companies held in conjunction with the course. "I would make it my objective to meet everybody in the room — we're talking people in the business I never would have met, mentors I never would have had."

Ultimately, her hard work paid off. After finishing the course in the top five of her class, Drake earned a store-development internship at Wal-Mart in Texas. Within months she was offered a permanent position as a real estate manager at the retail giant's headquarters in Bentonville, Ark.

"The people I work with have absolutely opened their arms," said Drake. "They see that I'm hungry. Between buying land, renewing leases, all the while figuring out how to bring the lowest possible cost to customers, I don't ever get bored. I love my job. Without Project REAP, this would not have been possible."

Nathaniel Centeno is another REAP success story. The 28-year-old graduate of the University of Maryland-College Park is now an assistant general manager at Westfield Shoppingtown Montgomery, in Bethesda, Md. "I'd applied for several entry-level jobs and got no response," said Centeno of his early struggles to break into commercial real estate. "I got the feeling you had to know somebody to even get an interview."

Then in the spring of 2003, Centeno saw an advertisement for Project REAP in *The Washington Post* and applied. After a few rounds of interviews and screening tests, he was accepted, and enrolled in the course taught at Howard University. "REAP gave me the nuts and bolts of the business and told me everything I needed to know to get my foot in the door," said Centeno. "I don't know how I would have gotten into it otherwise."

At the end of the course, Centeno went through what he describes as a "crazy, whirlwind interview process" with the five participating companies before finding a match with Westfield. "It was supposed to be an internship," said Centeno. "But when they made me an offer, they pretty much had a full-time position in mind."

After Centeno had been at Westfield for

two months, Bush went to check on his protégé on the job. "When I got there, they told me I was going to have to wait awhile because he was busy leading a staff meeting," said Bush. "That's just the kind of self-starter he is."

Centeno shrugs off his swift rise. "They threw me right into the fire, and I learned from experience," he said. "I don't think I

could have made a better choice."

And with plans to expand to New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, Project REAP will continue to offer much-needed, often hidden possibilities to talented individuals vital to the future of the industry. For more information on the program, visit www.projectreap.org.

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