

# The Power of a Mind Made Up

Victor Seals was determined to stay out of prison and support his family. Summit Academy OIC's 100 Hard Hats Program provided career training, direction and personal support to help him achieve his goals.

By Sarah Snider

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**Summit  
Profiles**

## The Power of a Mind Made Up

ictor Seals is sure of one thing: He will never be poor. POOR, he explains, is an acronym for “Passing Over Opportunity Repeatedly.” “I’ve passed up opportunities in the past because I didn’t think I could succeed or because I was afraid to step out of my comfort zone. I’ve made up my mind to recognize opportunity and pursue it.”

Seals’ focused, purposeful demeanor belies his shaky start in the adult world. Convicted of armed robbery at age 18, he spent the first 15 years of his adult life in prison in his home state of Michigan. “I was released from prison with my clothes and a footlocker full of books. I know guys who came out with more than that, and they ended up right back in. I never considered [going back to prison] an option.”

The decision to stay on the right side of the law meant that Seals had to find work, and opportunities were hard to find in Michigan. He left his wife and two young children in Michigan and came to live in Minneapolis. Unable to find full-time work, he worked three part-time jobs, lived with his grandmother and did not own a vehicle. Seals says, “I was just wandering and weighing my options.”

One of his employers performed plumbing work for the business next door to Summit Academy OIC. Intrigued, Seals stopped in one day and asked the receptionist about Summit. He was told that, if he qualified, the cost of his tuition could be covered by financial aid. Fifty-six percent of Summit’s students qualify for some form of financial aid (see box).

### “Everything I Expected and a Little More”

Seals was initially drawn to Summit’s administrative assistant track, as he has good business acumen and enjoys office work. However, he decided, “Listening to the sound of keyboards all day would drive me nuts.” He had enjoyed the plumbing experience he had with his previous part-time employer, so in fall 2003, he enrolled in the 20-week plumbing track of the 100 Hard Hats Program.

Even with his previous exposure to plumbing, the course presented some challenges. Seals admits that he is “no good with wood,” so the required coursework in carpentry

### Summit Students & Financial Aid

Fifty-six percent of Summit’s students qualify for some form of financial aid. The rest fall into the category Summit calls “Student I.” Student I’s are disqualified from financial aid due to earlier circumstances in their lives, including:

- Default on previous federal student loans or grants
- Previous drug convictions
- Failing to register for Selective Services

As the American Civil Liberties Union has pointed out, these laws discriminate against the poor.<sup>1</sup> Wealthier students with the same past records can simply pay for school out of pocket, while those in danger of being pushed to society’s margins will not be able to get federal aid to improve themselves. Summit Academy offers scholarships to these students so they can take advantage of training opportunities and get their lives back on track.

<sup>1</sup>Injustice 101: Higher Education Act Denies Financial Aid to Students with Drug Convictions.” American Civil Liberties Union web site, June 14, 2002. <http://www.aclu.org>

was often frustrating for him. He credits the program’s instructors with maintaining a positive outlook and helping him to keep going. “They told me, ‘If you want it, you can do it. It’s a lot of work, but you can succeed if you want it.’”

In particular, instructor Bill Strader served as a positive role model. Seals recalls that Strader showed genuine concern for his students and never discouraged anyone from pursuing Summit’s opportunities. Strader also instituted class elections, and elected officials had the opportunity to meet with him and voice their concerns. Seals was elected class president, and he says, “It meant a lot to me to have that kind of responsibility.” This encouragement helped Seals to stick to his resolution to “grin and bear it” through the carpentry portion of the course so that he could complete the plumbers’ union exam.

The plumbing courses, offered by Summit through a partnership with Dunwoody College of Technology, provided valuable hands-on training to Seals and his classmates. Seals describes the program as “everything I expected and a little more.” The instructors and representatives from the plumbers’ union explained the process of passing the union exam and entering the plumbing apprenticeship program. Without knowing what to expect, Seals says that preparing for and passing the test would have been nearly impossible.

**Summit Academy OIC believes that the best social service program in the world is a job!**



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### **Struggles and Successes**

After the 20-week training course, Seals worked part-time while waiting for his plumbers’ union exam results. His wife, daughter and son moved to Minnesota from Flint, Michigan, and Seals and his wife both worked at the Target Center.

Times were so tough that the family made the decision to apply for emergency assistance. While Seals’ wife was at the assistance office filling out an application, Seals was at home reading the mail. In that day’s mail were his plumbers’ union exam results. Not only did he pass, he was ranked 13th out of 486 applicants. He immediately drove to the assistance office and told his wife she no longer needed to fill out the assistance paperwork—his career as a union apprentice plumber could begin. Seals says, “Nothing was ever more on time than that letter.”

Now, looking back after completing his first year as an apprentice plumber, Seals gratefully acknowledges the support of his family, which helped him to get through long work days and two nights a week of apprenticeship classes. He is also dedicated to working with at-risk youth, both through his former parole officer and through Summit Academy’s Connections program. Without Summit Academy, Seals says that he would probably be working part-time jobs and would have no medical benefits for his family.

Seals plans to be self-employed soon, running his own plumbing shop. He enjoys plumbing and the administrative aspects of owning a business. Now that he has the skills and preparation he needs, he says, nothing can stop him from succeeding at his goals. In his words, “There is nothing more powerful than a mind made up.”



*Seals at Summit Academy OIC with daughter Briele, wife Cherly and son Dorian.*

# T R A I N I N G F O R L I F E !

## Summit Academy OIC and The 100 Hard Hats Program

Summit Academy OIC has served the community for nearly 40 years as a resource for adults and youth looking for the tools they need to become educated, employed and self-supporting members of their communities.

In 1996, two well-established organizations—Twin Cities Opportunities Industrialization Center (TCOIC) and Two or More—merged to form Summit Academy OIC. TCOIC, founded in 1966, offered training and job placement services to people with major barriers to self-sufficiency, including welfare recipients, ex-offenders, non-native English speakers, single parents and low-income individuals. Two or More, founded in 1989, had a proven record in training "hard core" inner-city youth in the construction trades and assisting them in the development of leadership and work skills to support positive, productive lives. The merger of these two entities created a strong, vital organization committed to providing quality training to the residents of North Minneapolis.

As the only community-based vocational training and job placement program in North Minneapolis, Summit Academy OIC fills an important need in the community.

Summit Academy, in partnership with Dunwoody College of Technology, provides access to training in carpentry, plumbing, electrical and painting tracks. Since 2004, Summit's 100 Hard Hats program has placed over 100 women and people of color in construction trades jobs. In addition to instruction, Summit helps students learn how to enter the Union for additional wage, education and employment benefits.

**Pre-Apprentice Carpentry:** Carpentry students at Summit receive instruction in safety, blueprint reading, basic tools and building materials and carpentry math. The course includes hands-on work in Summit's carpentry lab, including projects such as installing cabinets, windows and doors. Instructors are journeymen with more than 70 years of combined experience.

**Pre-Apprentice Plumbing:** After an initial 10 weeks of training at Summit, plumbing students go to Dunwoody for specialized instruction in pipefitting, how to install a sink and toilet and other specific skills of the plumbing trade. Coursework is hands-on and includes two weeks of on-the-job training with a plumbing contractor.

**Pre-Apprentice Painting:** Summit's painting program teaches the principles of interior and exterior painting. After 10 weeks of initial instruction, students learn about different types of paint, surfaces and ways to apply paint, both in Summit's paint lab and on actual job sites.

**Pre-Apprentice Electrician:** Students of Summit's electrical program take 10 weeks of specialized training at Dunwoody, where they learn electrical safety, hand/power tools, print reading, basic electricity, electrical math and the specific skills of the electrical trade through hands-on projects. The course includes two weeks of on-the-job training with an electrical contractor.

## Summit Academy At a Glance

**Location:** 935 Olson Memorial Highway  
Minneapolis, MN 55405  
**Phone:** 612.377.0150 **Fax:** 612.377.0156

**Students:** 400

**Staff:** 40

**Cost to educate one student:**  
\$3,475, compared to \$31,390 to incarcerate an adult for one year or \$42,262 to support an adult with two children on public assistance.

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PRODUCE MANY MORE  
SUCCESS STORIES.