

From Three People in a room to 1,400 Students: *How Skilled US Is Transforming Workforce Development on Indianapolis' Far East Side*

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When Kristi Williamson sat down with host Samantha Douglas on the Six Pillars in Action podcast, she described the beginnings of what has quietly become one of Indianapolis's most impactful workforce development organizations. Skilled US started in 2021 with a team of three people inside James and Rosemary Phalen High School. Today, that vision has grown into a 32-person operation on track to serve 1,400 students this year.

Skilled US was founded by Earl Martin Phalen as part of the broader Phalen Leadership Academy ecosystem. While Phalen Leadership Academies focus on K-12 education, Skilled US was built to address the economic stability of the families surrounding those students.



"When our scholars have the opportunity to have mom and dad and uncle employed," Kristi explained, "what they're learning at school takes on a whole new avenue." When a family is employed in sustainable careers, children show up differently at school.

From the beginning, Skilled US set out to do more than place people in jobs. The organization provides workforce training, supports participants with barriers such as childcare and transportation, and stays engaged for a full year after job placement to ensure the career is sustainable.

Originally, Skilled US served only families connected to Phalen schools. About a year and a half ago, they opened their programming to the broader community. Today, the organization serves four local high schools and runs open programming into the evening.

That expansion was made possible in part through support from the Indianapolis African American Quality of Life Initiative (IAAQLI), where Skilled US is a two-time awardee through the Employment pillar. "The moment that you pair the support with training," she said, "you really fulfill that ecosystem of an individual saying, 'Hey, I can do this.'"

If there's a throughline to everything Skilled US does, it's collaboration. "We look at every partner not as competition, but as what we do well and how do we elevate each other," Kristi said. Because of support like this, Skilled US is seeing



over 80% completion rates, strong employment outcomes, and an average wage gain of approximately \$36,000.

With state and federal funding in flux, Skilled US has responded by deepening collaborative relationships with training partners to ensure sustainability.

Skilled US serves residents of Indianapolis's Far East Side and beyond. Programming is available to high school students, adults, and community members seeking workforce training and career placement support. For more information, including employer and partner resources, visit skilledus.org.

This article is based on an episode of Six Pillars in Action, a podcast produced by the Indianapolis African American Quality of Life Initiative (IAAQLI). To learn more about IAAQLI and how to get involved, visit iaaqli.org.