

GBREB 'Farm Team' Aims to Grow Diversity in CRE

BY MIKE HOBAN

BOSTON — In an effort to address the lack of diversity in the overall make-up of the region's commercial real estate industry, the Greater Boston Real Estate Board (GBREB) and Foundation



Greg Vasil

Scholarship partner uAspire last spring launched an internship program designed to introduce high-performing students from low income families to CRE. Three college-bound young women – Zashira

Arias, Kiana Mendes, and Meitong (Mei) Huang – recently completed their paid summer internships at Colliers International, WinnCompanies and Leggat McCall Properties, respectively, and as a result of the program, at least one of the students is strongly considering a career in the industry.

“When we looked at Boston and how it has changed over the last 20 years as a city, one of the things that we really focused on



Zashira Arias and Thomas Hynes Jr. at Colliers International

was the fact that it had changed racially and ethnically from the city that it used to be,” says Greg Vasil, CEO of GBREB. “And as we looked at the real estate industry and the people that were involved in servicing that city, we realized that the industry was not a reflection of the people that

they served. So we thought the best way to achieve diversity was to create it ourselves with our own “farm team,” exposing young people to the industry and to the career and job opportunities that are available to them in real estate.”

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The Rental Housing Association (RHA) is the local affiliate of the National Apartment Association (NAA), and consists of over 600 members who own, manage or provide goods and services to 130,000 apartment homes in Massachusetts. NAA is a federation of 170 state and local affiliates; NAA encompasses over 68,000 members representing more than 7.86 million apartment homes throughout the United States and Canada

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Diversity in CRE

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An extension of the scholarship fund which this year alone donated nearly \$100,000 to 40 deserving youth, the GBREB pilot program matched the students with the companies following the organization's annual Leadership Breakfast in May. Thomas Hynes Jr., co-chairman and CEO of Colliers International's Boston office, and part of a committee of GBREB past presidents that was the driving force behind the creation of the program, stresses the need



Mahmood Malihi

for increased diversity in the industry. "The world is changing fast, and so is the whole corporate real estate structure. More and more companies are emphasizing diversity and if you're not in the diversity ballgame you're not (going to be relevant)," Hynes asserts.

The students, none of whom had ever worked in an office setting before, largely began by doing administrative tasks like filing and mail campaigns, but sponsors soon discovered that the students were capable of much more. Mei Huang, who interned with Leggat McCall, completed a number of more complex projects, including one where she used Google Earth to identify transit-oriented development (TOD) sites within a five minute walk of Metro Boston MBTA stations for the firm.

"She's just a great kid, really smart and really motivated, so once we found a groove, it was great," conveys Megan Pasquina, the project manager at Leggat McCall who mentored Mei during her internship. "Being able to watch her develop and get more comfortable as she gave her presentations to me and (LMP principal) Mahmood (Malihi) was pretty amazing. And it was an awesome opportunity for a high school kid." Kelly Spangler, HR generalist at WinnCompanies (who supervised Mendes) and Genevieve Hemenway, executive assistant to Hynes at Colliers (who oversaw Arias) were equally effusive in their praise for the interns. "Sometimes with younger people you think that you need to manage them more, but she was able to take the ball and run with it, and that was a pleasant surprise," says Hemenway.



Gilbert Winn and Kiana Mendes at WinnCompanies

Mendes made a similar impression on the brass at WinnCompanies, and has indicated a strong interest in real estate development. "I was leaning toward it, but now I'm pretty confident that's what I want to do," says Mendes. "Maybe I can return to Winn someday and develop properties."

GBREB plans to greatly expand the program next year, and has enlisted the help of the city of Boston to help them do so. Vasil says Mayor Martin J. Walsh is very interested in the internship program as a result of meeting the students when he was the keynote speaker at the Leadership Breakfast event in May, so GBREB is working as a team with uAspire and the Private Industry Council PIC (which manages the private sector component of the Mayor's Summer Jobs

Campaign by matching the skill sets of the students to the jobs) to combine the internship program with the Mayor's program.

GBREB member Malihi, himself an Iranian-American, hopes that the initiative will help address the diversity issue in Greater Boston CRE. "It is not because the firms don't try (to address diversity). A lot of our colleagues in the industry actually have tried," says Malihi. "But we felt that reaching out to high school and college students and educating them about what this industry is all about and what kind of opportunities exist would be a good long-term strategy, so that a decade from now, we would have more young people with an awareness of what the industry has to offer." ■

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