

Summer Jobs For Detroit Youth

Strong collaboration provides quality work experiences

By Eddie B. Allen Jr.

Five years ago, you couldn't have told the homeless, high school dropout that he'd be wearing a suit to work rather than working the corners where he sold drugs.

Today Ricky Woods, 20, regards his transformation as a testimonial: He went from chasing the paper that bought him gym shoes and clothes to guiding other young Detroiters in the ways of legitimate job-seeking and self-development.

"It's been a wonderful experience," Woods says of his catharsis.

Aided by the opportunity he received from a Skillman Foundation-funded, part-time position at Prevailing Community Development Corp. last summer, he continues working with the organization as a youth mentor.

Woods credits the program with inspiring him to return to school – finishing with a 3.8 grade average – and later enrolling at the University of Phoenix where he studies art literature.

"Words can't explain how truly blessed I am to be a part of this program," adds Woods. "After maybe the sixth week, it was no longer about just getting the money to buy the new clothes. It was about getting better."

Through the recently formed Detroit Youth Employment Consortium, Skillman's goal for summer 2009 training and development is to help as many as 5,000 other young people get "better." Consisting of Skillman, which has contributed a \$500,000 grant, the Bank of America and Knight Foundations plus community partners that include Johnson Controls, Greening of Detroit, the Student Conservation Association and Youth Employment Commission, the Consortium's goal is to communicate, coordinate and collaborate with private-sector employers to expand youth opportunity. High school-aged Detroiters number about 70,000 of the unemployed, yet trainable, potential recruits between 14 and 18 that are the Consortium's target.

"The overwhelming message that we get as we talk to young people is, 'We want to work,'" says Ed Egnatios, Skillman senior program officer and Good Neighborhoods coordinator. Teenaged job-seekers frequently lament the process of taking long bus rides, filling out job applications and searching for work, but coming up short, Egnatios adds.

The Consortium's plan for summer 2009 is to solidify funding, corporate internships and other opportunities that will significantly impact joblessness among youth. In collaboration with the City of Detroit, Skillman and its partners hope to leverage millions of dollars from President Barack Obama's economic stimulus initiative to meet the 5,000-job goal, says Egnatios.

"It's really to build a three- to five-year effort," he says. "We tend to emphasize ages 14 to 18, but the city is also hoping to include those up to age 24."

At least one-third of possible employees identified for recruitment are residents of the Skillman Good Neighborhoods districts that contain Detroit's largest numbers of youth. Skillman's 2008 summer program "was really a series of pilots," adds Egnatios. Last year's employment effort placed young people in hourly or stipend learning positions that ranged from jobs with arts organizations to participating in youth groups and sociology projects. The emphasis for 2009, Egnatios says, will be on "quality employment that aids youth development. That could be a great job, or it could be academic tutoring in the morning, going to college sites in the afternoon and doing community service maybe two or three days a week."

Despite national economic challenges that have even reduced job availability for more mature adults, Egnatios says the Consortium's plan benefits from 2008's commitment by programs and organizations that pledged to hire youth again.

As in the case of Woods, Egnatios says Skillman has watched employment translate to academic and self-improvement.

"This has not happened in quite a long time that leaders in the community call on businesses to hire young people," says Egnatios. "We have been so impressed with the City of Detroit and the State of Michigan and their openness to this collaborative and innovative approach to helping youth. It's about creating more sustainable youth employment opportunities than has ever been done before." Shuna Hayward, vice president of programs and development for Detroit's Youth

Employment Commission, which oversees the Consortium's jobs initiative, agrees. "I just love hearing the stories from the young people at the end of the summer of what they got out of this experience, what they might've been doing otherwise had they not had this experience, and what they intend to do with it moving forward," says Hayward. "From a big-picture perspective, this Consortium approach will certainly help to raise the visibility of youth employment."

Through a major Skillman grant and other resources, 34 community agencies hired youth last summer, while up to 100 organizations and businesses may participate this year. Agencies apply for grant funds to hire the young adults who undergo an interview and screening process before beginning training, Hayward says. "Everyone has an investment in it," she adds. Chaunci Cline, executive director of Prevailing Community Development, says the Consortium's effort reinforces a top priority for their organization. Prevailing serves youth and families in Skillman's Chadsey-Condon neighborhood including West Warren and Livernois Avenues, and West Grand Boulevard. "Last year, we gauged that we served approximately 1,300 young people, directly and indirectly, including after-school programs for tutoring and mentoring, along with family counseling, intervention and referrals," she says. "The summer piece is really an added value...Once those young people develop a work ethic, they'll work for life." Prevailing, which also oversees the West Warren Business Association, trains youth in resume-writing, com-



KIDS MATTER HERE:

The Skillman Foundation's Good Neighborhoods is a 10-year \$100-million program that provides full-scale support to six Detroit neighborhoods where 65,000 children live.



Young people hard at work for Greening of Detroit during the summer of 2008.

puter literacy and job preparation every 10 weeks, sending them to employment sites at markets, offices and restaurants during summer months. Those who advance, as Woods has since the days when gym shoes were his prized possessions, go on to teach others in youth mentor capacities. Along with support from friends and co-mentors like Dereon McCoy, Donta McCoy and Shawn McKinney, Woods says the work itself is life-changing. "When I talk to other young people who say all they want to do is make money hustling, I tell them, 'I used to be the same way,'" Woods adds. "When they see someone their age doing well, they believe they can do well, too."

Community Partners

Three major organizations have joined together and have helped develop a unique partnership that symbolizes the innovation encouraged by the Detroit Youth Employment Consortium's effort. Among their youth employment and related initiatives are:

Johnson Controls – Based in Milwaukee, the company's \$300,000 contribution to 2009 summer employment of Detroit youth helps support the Conservation Leadership Corps. First established in Milwaukee in 2006, the Corps was successfully replicated in Baltimore before it began in Michigan last year. Through the Corps, economically disadvantaged high school students are hired to work in county parks on projects such as removal of invasive species, the building of trails and bridges, planting trees, digging ditches, and other environmental activism. Last year, 89 Corps participants in Detroit restored and maintained natural areas and parklands in city and state parks. Additional Johnson-sponsored programs include the "A World in Motion" Society for Automotive Engineers program which pairs Johnson Controls employees with students to encourage them in pursuing math, science and engineering. A "Jet Toy Olympics," in which students will build and race mechanical devices in contests with other schools is also supported by Johnson and its employees.

Greening of Detroit – A partner with Johnson Controls and the Student Conservancy Association in the Conservation Leadership Corps, the organization sponsors the Green Corps Youth Employment and Environmental Leadership Program. A non-profit effort developed 11 years ago, the initiative emphasizes tree-planting and maintenance, along with education and training in streetscape developments, community gardens, neighborhood park and playground restoration projects and work-force development. The Green Corps also hosts a free summer camp. Largely volunteer-led, the Green Corps recruits high school youth and trains them in urban ecology, which relates to job opportunities in the field of environmental protection.

Student Conservancy Association – Also a partner in the Conservation Leadership Corps, the Association provides summer projects, year-round work opportunities and internships designed to teach young people about preserving and protecting natural and cultural resources. Targeting high school students in major cities where environment-related job opportunities may be under-promoted, the Association connects youth with natural resource management professionals and instructs them in trail-building, wildfire prevention, land restoration and habitat protection. National work crews and community programs are highlighted, and students 18 and older are encouraged to explore both short-term and long-term employment.

Ways You Can Get Involved

1. Pledge to hire young Detroiters where you work

- Youth, ages 14-18 or young adults, 19-24

2. Pledge to host a summer employment program

- Hire young persons to help as staff.
- Design a stipended summer learning/ community service program for youth.
- Develop a sponsored youth-employment program for neighborhood-based businesses.

3. Pledge to join with us and write a check to help fund more summer jobs

- Corporations, foundations or caring individuals

For more details about the Detroit Youth Employment Consortium, contact Pat W.T. Euseary, City Connect Detroit, at 313.887.6503 or info@cityconnectdetroit.org.

For more information about becoming an employer or other ways to get involved, contact Shuna Hayward, Youth Development Commission, at 313.963.8916 or skhayward@ydcdetroit.org.



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A voice for Detroit Children since 1960

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Learn more about the Skillman Foundation and its Good Neighborhoods program at www.skillman.org