

Program sets stage to help young people seeking jobs

Nonprofit teaches soft skills to ease disadvantaged youth into corporate world

By: Alexia Elejalde-Ruiz, Contact Reporter, Chicago Tribune | Monday, December 21, 2015

Dawn Harris was known as the quietest of her nine siblings. So quiet you could “forget she is in the room,” says her dad, Kevin Harris.

But over the past couple of years, “my confidence has (gone) through the roof,” said Harris, 20, an intern at The PrivateBank’s corporate headquarters downtown. She credits a youth program that not only hooked her up with the internship but cultivated her social savvy, which some say is key to addressing the chasm leaving young people out of jobs even as employers struggle to fill openings.

The Development School for Youth, from which Harris graduated last year, is one of several programs of the All Stars Project, a nonprofit that uses elements of the performing arts to develop kids from poor communities. It is also one of many programs tackling the steep decline in youth employment, which has raised alarms about the long-term economic consequences of a generation late to acquire work experience.

The employment rate among teens aged 16 to 19 plunged to 26 percent in 2014 from 43 percent in 2000, and among young adults aged 20 to 24 it dropped to 62 percent from 70 percent, according to a report released Wednesday by the Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution. Median hourly wages also fell over that period, down 6 percent to \$7.69 for teens and down 5 percent to \$10.71 for young adults.

To compare, the employment rate for adults 25 and older fell much more modestly, to 61 percent from 66 percent, and median wage ticked up slightly, less than 1 percent, to \$19.23.

Job cuts during the Great Recession and the earlier dot-com bust hit young people particularly hard, as they have weaker experience and networks, and there has been only a modest improvement post-recession, said Martha Ross, author of the report and a fellow at the think tank. Some benign factors may be at play, such as more summer school and unpaid internships, but overall the pattern is troubling because early work experience builds skills for future career success, Ross said.

Broken down by race, the youth employment problem comes into starker focus. Black teens in 2014 were employed at a rate of 19 percent, compared with 23 percent for Latinos and 31 percent for whites, according to Ross’ research. Asian/Pacific Islanders had the lowest rates among teens, at 16 percent, but they also have the highest rates of school enrollment, Ross said.

The trend has sparked calls for action from the public and private sectors.

Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton this summer proposed giving companies tax credits of \$1,500 for each apprentice they hire, with additional incentives for hiring young people. Her challenger Sen. Bernie Sanders, calling youth unemployment a “national tragedy,” co-sponsored a bill that would provide \$5.5 billion to state and local governments to employ 1 million youth. Starbucks announced a coalition of some 30 companies that have pledged to hire 100,000 “opportunity youth” by 2018, a bid to chip away at the 5.6 million 16- to 24-year-olds in the U.S. who are neither working nor in school.

But offering more jobs skips a step, some who work with youth say. Many kids growing up in poor and high-crime areas lack exposure to the corporate world and basic social skills to make them desirable candidates, presenting a challenge not only to them but to employers with jobs to fill.



Dawn Harris, 20, center, an intern at The PrivateBank, stands Dec. 17, 2015, with her supervisor, Managing Director Linda Ross. Harris is a graduate of the Development School for Youth, which helps kids from low-income communities bone up on social skills. (Phil Velasquez / Chicago Tribune)

“The divide is that the young people have been so isolated from the mainstream that they’re not prepared to culturally and socially function in these communities,” said Gabrielle Kurlander, president and CEO of the All Stars Project, a New York-based nonprofit founded in 1981. “And corporate leaders are not prepared to have them in the workplace.”

David Cherry, city leader in Chicago for the nonprofit, said the most disconnected, hardest-to-reach kids are often left behind by otherwise well-meaning jobs programs.

“If you want to change some things, you can’t just reach the kids who are ready now,” said Cherry, whose team recruits kids at schools and transit stations. “These kids can’t just go straight from their neighborhoods to the jobs.”

The world’s a stage

The Development School for Youth, which launched in Chicago in 2009, uses role-play and other performance techniques to build confidence and workplace “soft skills,” like how to carry a conversation and accept feedback, teaching that life is a constant improvisation and the office no different from a stage.

The 12-week program accepts youth aged 16 to 21, without regard for academic performance, and after they graduate they are placed in six-week corporate internships that pay at least \$12 an hour. Their supervisors at participating companies also attend the workshops to learn, for example, how to give constructive criticism. In Chicago, 41 young people graduated this year.

At an introductory session this fall for the 2016 class, about two dozen teens and young adults formed a circle in the All Star Project’s downtown office and played drama games with volunteer mentors.

“This is a pen,” Greg Mutz, CEO of AMLI Residential, growled to the teenager standing beside him.

“A what?” the girl growled back, trying to match Mutz’ demon voice.

“A pen!” the 70-year-old executive thundered.

“A what?”

Playacting helps prepare youth for jobs

The imitation game sent even the wariest of the participants into giggles.

In another committed performance, Mutz, who has hosted interns at his real estate management company, dropped to his knees and dragged himself laboriously across the carpet in his suit, grunting as he lugged an imaginary lead pipe.

“You stepped out of your comfort zones and you’re still living, you’re here to tell about it,” Meghan Coen, program manager for the DSY, explained to the students, most of them from Chicago’s South and West sides, as she drew parallels to what it’s like to start a job.

“We work with you on a costume, on your script, on your body language — all of that is part of the professional performance you’re creating every time you come downtown.”

Establishing (eye) contact

Some employers say they struggle find to job candidates with basic interpersonal skills.

“Smiling and being excited and having a positive attitude — that’s a real challenge to people, a lot of times it doesn’t come naturally,” said Mike Carver, general manager of Shedd Aquarium food services, which are operated by Sodexo. “Eye contact is really something we have to reteach.”

Carver, who employs about 100 people at the Shedd’s food court, coffee station and restaurant, said open positions, which start at \$11 to \$14, go unfilled for a long time because it is hard to find people with a balance of soft and occupational skills. He blames technology, and particularly mobile phones, for derailing young people’s ability to have one-on-one interactions. The good news, he said, is that people can learn.

Many programs aim to get youth up to speed. Starbucks’ new store in Englewood, scheduled to open next year, will have an on-site training facility to teach customer service and retail skills.

The Chicago Urban League, which each year sees about 150 to 300 young people aged 16 to 24 through its various job readiness programs, trains kids in digital literacy and occupation-specific skills as well as basic social graces, like how to introduce yourself and look someone in the eye.

“We find ourselves having to go back to basics,” said Andrew Wells, director of workforce development at the Chicago Urban League.

Confidence, he said, is a major barrier for kids from underprivileged communities.

“I think there’s a lack of exposure to the corporate environment and a lack of professional mentors,” Wells said. “A lot of our youth really identify with entertainers, whereas in my day we identified more with lawyers, doctors.”

Five skills to develop

Research has found that soft skills rival technical and academic skills in predicting success in the workplace, said Laura Lippman, an independent consultant on youth soft skills. As a result, they are increasingly desired by employers, who say they can always train people in the technical matters, she said.

Precisely which soft skills are important for career success has been difficult to define. A report released this summer by the nonprofit research organization Child Trends, which reviewed 380 surveys and studies, pinpointed five that best boosted the chances youth get and keep jobs, perform well or earn more.

Most predictive are social skills, such as the ability to resolve conflict and get along with others, said Lippman, lead author of the report. Higher-order thinking, such as decision-making, also has become increasingly important as information grows and jobs become more complex, she said.

Communication, especially the ability to interact with people from different backgrounds, is another key soft skill. The last two, self-control and positive

self-concept, which includes confidence, are particularly relevant to youth, who often don’t have a good sense of their capabilities, Lippman said.

The best way to acquire these skills, she added, “is actually doing them in the workplace.”

AMLI Residential, which manages 3,000 apartment units in Chicago and 28,000 across the country, is among 39 corporate sponsors in Chicago, and 146 nationally, that hosted workshops or interns this year with the Development School for Youth.

Mutz, the CEO, said he had his two interns this summer attend meetings weekly in various departments, take minutes and write a memo that he would then critique.

“The first couple of memos I get are — well, you can imagine,” Mutz said, acknowledging the challenge of understanding business jargon. “I say there’s no sin in not knowing but one of the first things about learning is asking, having a fertile mind.”

Lives don’t turn around in six weeks, Mutz said, but at the end “they’re more secure, more self-assured, more willing to write a memo.”



The Development School for Youth, a program of the All Stars Project, uses elements of the performing arts to teach basic social skills to kids from poor community. Dec. 18, 2015. (Alexia Elejalde-Ruiz / Chicago Tribune)

‘Beautiful open mind’

Harris, the DSY graduate working at PrivateBank, said the performance training helped break her out of her shell.

“Before I wasn’t a person to ask questions,” said Harris, who was raised in the Austin neighborhood on the West side but recently moved with her family to Oak Park. “Being here helped me know everyone makes mistakes.”

The bank, where she mostly does filing and data entry, is her second internship with the program, and it was extended to the end of this year. Last year she spent six weeks as an intern at Equity Residential, a real estate company.

The hands-on experience and weekly contact with executives has been most useful, Harris said. She recalls, at her first internship, when a microwave handle started melting in some apartment units and she had to get the replacements shipped to the right homes.

“That was a big one for me because I’m talking to real people about the issue and I had the opportunity to fix it,” Harris said. “A lot of trust was built doing that.”

Kevin Harris, who drops his daughter off at work each morning and picks her up from the train station at night, said he has noticed a big change in his quietest child. She is still soft-spoken but asserts her opinions, revealing “a beautiful open mind.”

“Other programs kept them off the street, but it didn’t take them past that,” he said. “This is a whole other level.”