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Workforce Development, One Teen at a Time

After four decades in corporate life, I retired and did a lot of volunteer work. Before my EFN fellowship, I'd never worked with kids. I had no intention that I would work with kids. But here, at my Encore Fellowship at Boys and Girls Club of Cleveland, the key was working with the kids – and once that started, it was cathartic. I realized this is what I want to do. I discovered it purely by accident.

I grew up in a suburban neighborhood. I went to a Big 10 school, spent my entire career dealing with corporate executives. I have two grown sons, I coached sports and sat on the school board. But I had no exposure to kids from the inner-city, like these kids. This is not the same. They're great kids who've been dealt a really crappy hand. It shouldn't have been a surprise, but I didn't expect how bright and ambitious they are. They're good kids – you just have to get their attention.

The Boys and Girls Club does a phenomenal job in Cleveland; kids in tough neighborhoods have a place to go after school. But once a youth graduates, there are no programs. Only 15 percent of local graduates go on to college; one funder asked, "What do you do for the other 85 percent?"

The answer was, nothing – these kids are on their own. But there are tremendous employment opportunities in Cleveland, and not enough qualified people. Obviously, there's a gap there. I was brought in to put together a program to prepare high-school students who didn't look like they were headed for college, for careers. It wasn't a program that existed; I was a staff of one.

The original concept was to convince companies to hire these kids. But we were way too downstream. Finding the jobs was the easy part. The problem was getting the kids to believe they can do it.

First, I went out to talk with employers – that’s my comfort zone. They were looking for an employable mentality -- kids who understood showing up for work, working in a group, taking instruction...the things most kids would get at home, but these kids didn’t; it wasn’t part of their lives. They thought they were going to be rap stars or in the NBA. The challenge was not to teach people how to be employees, but to work with kids on their employability in the marketplace.

We focused on four areas. We helped kids out with taking a state-sponsored assessment program, in terms of skills needed to get into a program in IT or manufacturing. Secondly, we made a lot of contacts where they could get training. Third, we wanted to get kids used to a work environment. We reached out to local businesses and set up a work-study, where kids shadowed real employees on site and learned what it takes to be an employee. We followed up with summer internships, which gave us the chance to do some coaching. The fourth area was entrepreneurial skills; Liberty Ford donated equipment and taught kids how to detail cars for club staff. The kids set the schedule, the prices, collected payments and kept the books.

I was only there for one year, with 30 kids. We proved the concept. The program is continuing. The goal is 120 or 130 kids over the next 2 years. We spent a lot of time ‘evangelizing’ the program– we’d invite 40 kids to a meeting; they’d come, primarily, because there’d be pizza. Five or six turned out to be motivated, but I can work with a handful. The biggest thing is peer support. If five or six kids have a fantastic time, next year we’ll have more. Kids that age, if they’d rather play ball than learn the basics of IT coding, they’re going to play ball.

What you find is that a lot of kids are talented but haven’t been exposed to work. A lot of the effort was finding kids’ strengths and showing them what working meant. It was incredibly rewarding.

These kids got under my skin. After my fellowship, I became a CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) volunteer; it’s an opportunity to work with neglected or abused kids and help them find some permanency and safety. As part of College Now, I am acting as a mentor for a youth attending college who has not been exposed to the college environment, and assisting with career planning. As a member on the board of West Side Catholic Center, which seeks to provide immediate services and life pathways for the disadvantaged. I am involved in the employment program to prepare our clients with employability skills, help them to find jobs, and mentor them as they progress forward. I got to love these kids and just wanted to help.

My 30 kids, they’re graduating now. At least 28 will go on to some post-secondary training. It’s really nice to wake up in the morning and feel, “I made a little difference.”