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# Summer camp gets youths job-ready

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Youth Workforce members, from left, Izzy Sanchez, Jean Merlain and Keith Scola at the Big Picture Soda Co., a student-run enterprise started at the Met School in 2006.

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Alyssa Baker, 17, and Alvera Stridel, 16, both of Providence, landed summer jobs as counselors-in-training for the Providence After School Alliance, which has started a summer camp for middle school students this year. The alliance trained high school students to assist in leading the camp's programs. According to Baker, the campers were more likely to listen to the high school counselors than they were to the older staffers.

Delia Boyle and Rachel Lessing, both 15-year-olds from Bristol, spent part of their summer building a small wooden boat called a Bevins skiff at the International Yacht Restoration School through a program called My Turn. "I liked it because it wasn't a typical summer job. It wasn't, like, monotonous. You get to do something different every day."

Lessing said there were 10 people in the program, eight boys and two girls. They were divided into two

teams, and each team built a skiff, which will be raffled off to help pay for next year's program.

Mia Sounnakhone, 15, and Tiffany Fallin, both of Woonsocket, spent their summers with the RiverzEdge Arts Project in Woonsocket. Brad Fesmire, a former RISD grad student who runs the program, said the RiverzEdge serves about 110 kids annually, helping them explore painting, silk screening, digital photography and graphic design. This summer, about 20 students, among them Sounnakhone and Fallin, were at RiverzEdge as part of the state's Youth Workforce Development System.

"We pay the kids an educational stipend. We treat it like a job," Fesmire said. "It's half art skills, half job skills — and they have a good time."

Hector Collado, 18, of Pawtucket, was working as a certified nursing assistant for Lifespan Youth Employment, which is run by the Lifespan hospital system. He said the program allowed him to work as a CNA in a hospital setting. When the nine-week program is over, he said, he hopes to get a job at Rhode Island Hospital.

Brandon Melton, Lifespan's senior vice president for human resources, said the Lifespan system has hired about 28 percent of the 200 people who have participated in Lifespan Youth Employment over the past four years.

Students and representatives from 29 of the programs participating in the state's Youth Workforce Development System gathered on Aug. 14 at the Buttonwoods Community Center in Warwick to showcase their accomplishments. The International Yacht Restoration School, for example, had poster boards with photos of students building their skiffs. RiverzEdge had displays of student artwork.

There were speeches. There was food. The 54 students on hand all received certificates of accomplishment.

Lori Norris, chief of Youth Services for the Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training, said this was the first year the state had held a summer showcase for its youth work force programs. "We wanted to have a chance to celebrate what they learned, and recognize that it's no small feat," Norris said.

Norris said about 900 young people, between the ages of 14 and 24, take part in the summer jobs programs financed through the state Department of Labor and Training, with 38 different vendors running a total of 48 summer programs. This comes at a time when teenage employment is hitting historical lows. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the employment rate for teenagers 16 to 19 was about 33 percent in June, compared with about 50 percent in the 1950s.

Norris said that for every young person who found summer employment through the Youth Workforce Development System this year, there were 2.5 waiting to fill each slot.

The young workers get paid for their labor. Norris said participants receive an average of between \$600 and \$700 each summer. That money, she said, is often needed to help support families, or to buy back-to-school supplies. No matter what the money is used for, she said, the act of earning it can change the way young people regard their money.

"If the money comes from sweat equity, you become more thoughtful about how you spend it," she said.

Norris said the primary goal of the youth work force system is to prepare people for employment. "This

is a work program, not summer camp,” she said. “It’s not just altruistic programming. It gets them focused on the acquisition of skills that will allow them to transition into the work force.”

Norris said there is value in having young workers hear from real employers, and finding out the kinds of careers they like — or don’t like. The latter, she pointed out, can be just as important as the former.

The Youth Workforce Development Program in Rhode Island has grown dramatically since 2005. At that time, the program served 323 young people using a federal grant of \$1.5 million. There was one youth center in the state.

In program year 2006 (program years run from July 1 to June 30) the Governor’s Workforce Board decided to expand the state’s youth program, and provided \$600,000 for a pilot summer jobs program.

By 2007-08, the program had put together state and federal money totaling \$3.3 million. The number of youth centers had expanded from one to seven, and the program served 2,731 people with year-round programs, including summer jobs. In the current program year, 2008-09, the program has already allocated \$2.8 million and is in the process of awarding \$1.4 million more, for a total of \$4.2 million. The number of youth centers has grown to 13, and the youth workforce system will serve at least 4,100 people.

Additional financing comes from the community-based organizations that participate in the state’s Youth Workforce Development System, about \$3.4 million in program year 2007-2008 and \$4.3 million in 2008-2009.

During her speech at the Buttonwoods Community Center, Department of Labor and Training director Sandra Powell spoke of the transformation of the state’s youth work force system.

As the gathering was breaking up, Keith Scola, 16, and Jean Merlain, 17, both of the Met School in Providence, were taking out a display for the Big Picture Soda Co., a student-run enterprise started at the Met School in 2006 that manufactures and markets soda. Merlain is the CEO. Scola is the chief financial officer. “I know my way around QuickBooks,” he said, referring to an accounting software program.

Both executives wore matching polo shirts with the Big Picture Soda logo on it. Merlain said running the company is a year-round operation. During the school year, he said, they work on Big Picture Tuesdays and Thursdays. In the summers, they’re at it full time, part of the state youth program.

Scola said he has his sights set on Bryant University, and an accounting career, after high school. “My passion is accounting,” he said.

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