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Tips2succeed in the hospitality industry - Program teaches skills, finds jobs and changes lives

By “Cynthia Sweeney”, Business Journal Staff Reporter

Each year, 55 youth transfer out of the foster care in Sonoma County. As these youth exit the system, many are not prepared for the challenges of adulthood and finding long-term, sustainable employment.

Tips2Succeed is a nonprofit, tuition free program that gives these at-risk young adults, ages 18-24, the basic skills they need to enter the hospitality industry.

The program, which began last year, is seven weeks long and consists of two-hour workshops that meet twice a week. Students, the majority of whom come from a foster-care background, learn basic front of the house responsibilities such as serving skills, managing guests, problem solving and teamwork. They also earn their California Food Handlers Certification.

Two pilot programs were conducted last year, and out of 25 enrolled students 19 completed the program and 63 percent are now employed. This past April, out of 14 graduates, 12 have found jobs in the restaurant/hospitality industry.

“We are so proud of these students. They worked hard to overcome their fears of public speaking and our Job Fair helped them to be comfortable interviewing with potential employers. We saw so much growth in their self confidence in the seven weeks of training,” said Kathryn Wright, the program’s director.

Tips2Succeed does more than just teach skills and help the youth find a job, however. It’s short-term mentoring and internship, and students say it’s life-changing.

“I definitely feel taken in and blessed for this opportunity. It’s not just a job, it affects every aspect of my life,” said 19-year old Jesse BergRussell. “Before (taking the program), I was always worrying, ‘will ends meet?’ That daily stress weighs on you,” he said, adding now he is able to relax and think about getting ahead in life, and recently was able to buy a car.

Along with basic job duties, students also learn the more nuanced skills of professional behavior that are attractive to hospitality industry employers. Those include the importance of personal appearance, committing to job attendance, smiling, shaking hands, and eye contact, which also results in higher self-confidence. They also learn to construct a resume, how to prepare for an interview, and ultimately they are paired with a business to participate in a four to six week internship.



Jesse BergRussell

The seven-week program is offered twice a year, in February and September. The most recent program took place at the Hilton Wine Country Hotel in Santa Rosa, which donates space for the workshops.

“It’s easy to support such a great program. We can train skills, but we can’t train personality, said General Manager Sally Shaffer, who also takes the students on tours of the hotel, so they can see where they might like to work. Sometimes they aren’t even aware some kinds of jobs exist.

For those youth looking for employment, landing a job in the hospitality industry can be a “Catch 22” situation when experience is usually required to get a job, but no one will give you a job so you can get that experience.

On the industry side, while students in this program may not have the right experience, they are enthusiastic and committed to working. The Hilton has hired seven students from the program, including BergRussell, who recently earned the distinction of employee of the month. He couldn't speak highly enough of the program. The only way he could have gotten the job otherwise would have been by "dumb luck," he said.

Depending on where students live, Shaffer also networks with other industry professionals to help locate possible jobs for them. Aside from the training, part of the reason she said she is willing to take a risk on these kids-including hiring a youth with Asperger's syndrome- is the on-going support Tips2succeed provides. If a problem should arise, Shaffer knows she can call the organizers of the program.

At the conclusion of the most recent class, 10 businesses participated in a Tips2succeed job fair, with panel speakers, affording students immediate access to interview for a possible job.

"This is our workforce of tomorrow, and why workplaces are on board," said Tips2succeed Executive Director Deanne Trombetta Marbach.

Trombetta Marbach has a background in helping at-risk youth. Originally from Northern California, she went to college in New York and thereafter worked with inner-city youth finding them jobs they never even knew existed. On returning to Sonoma in the last few years, the idea of doing something similar was percolating until 2013 when she asked a friend, Wright, to join her in talking to hospitality industry professionals about how to make the program work. They thought the hospitality industry would be a good fit and meet a lot of youth's needs, like giving them a flexible schedule in case they wanted to go to college.

"It kept snowballing and we came away with a good sense of what we wanted to do," Trombetta Marbach said. "We thought we were filling a niche."

Tips2succeed, which relies largely on donations, also partnered with Social Advocates for Youth (SAY), TLC Child and Family Services and Voice our Independent Choices for Emancipation Support (VOICES) for guidance and advice.

After a year of research networking and worrying if the program would work, the women took the advice to "just do it," and jumped in feet first.

Mary Schiller, a culinary instructor at Maria Carrillo High School, also jumped on board and helped develop a curriculum. She took her 10 years of teaching academics, practical skills and catering and honed it for her audience.

Along the way, the women said they have learned what does and doesn't work, listened to feedback from the students and tweaked each class to better suit their needs.

The team also realized that these youth need on-going support. They give them their cell phone numbers, and students keep in touch, calling to say they'll be late for class, or to announce they got a job. "We have developed a mutual trust and have wonderful relationships with the students," Trombetta Marbach said.



Culinary Instructor Mary Schiller and students

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