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## The Boston Globe

### **It's work staying out of trouble**

#### **Giving at-risk youths job experience improves their outlooks**

By Russell Contreras, Globe Staff | May 6, 2007

He's made some mistakes. John knows that. And if he doesn't straighten up, it could get worse. A few more bad decisions, and he could get arrested, land in jail, or even worse, end up dead.

But the 17-year-old doesn't want to think about that scenario, especially not while he's working part time for the Tyngsborough Fire Department and getting to know the firefighters. He's getting other ideas, like going to college, buckling down. He's thinking of maybe becoming a firefighter.

"Working here is getting me thinking," said John, whose last name can't be used because he's involved with the Department of Youth Services. "I see what these guys go through, and it's giving me ideas."

And that's the point of the apprenticeship program at the Eliot Community Center in Lowell, said Lee-Ann Martelle, program director at the center. Cosponsored by the Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps, the program, which started last June with a \$10,000 state grant, seeks to match at-risk youth with area businesses for job training so that the experience may develop seeds for a brighter future.

"Many have never even had a job," said Martelle. "So that first job can be intimidating."

Two young people have been through the program, and two are in it now. One of those who finished the program is getting a GED, while the other is at Lowell High School and looking for a summer job.

The youths are referred to the Eliot Center by police and the court system, Martelle said. A number of them have been involved in illegal or dangerous activities, and many have been exposed to violence or are victims of violence, she said.

The goal of the center is to help bring the students back into the community after they spend time in a state residential program, she said. The center offers counseling, educational and recreational activities, and vocational training -- a network of community resources for youth. But getting work experience is a key component in getting their life together.

"Employment is the biggest need these kids have," said Martelle. "The main thing I want them to get is exposure to the workforce."

That's something John said he's getting as he works about 20 hours a week at the fire station. During a recent afternoon, John spent time sweeping the floor and washing firetrucks. Because of fire regulations, John can't accompany firefighters to fires or on emergency calls. But he watches them prepare and listens to their discussion about fire safety. For the first time in his life, he's thinking about a career.

"I don't want to be a cop or anything like that," said John, "but this is an industry I could get into."

The pay and benefits are good, especially for someone with a family, said John. These are thoughts he's never had until now.

Tyngsborough Fire Lieutenant Chris Mahoney said the Fire Department is happy with the work John has been doing. "It's not fun work but someone has to do it."

"It gives them a possible career choice," he added of the program. "The kids we see have usually done something wrong, but not horrible, you know?"

Meanwhile, in Lowell, Miguel, 17, is an Eliot Center student assigned to the Sir Speedy copy center just outside of downtown. Miguel admitted he "made a couple of mistakes" when he first started the job. But now he's got the hang of it. "It's an easy job. I like doing it," said Miguel, who is also working on his GED at the Eliot Center.

Miguel shows up on time and starts helping out as soon as he walks in the door, said Maya Shah, manager of Sir Speedy. She said she had to show him how to do things only once. His job duties include making copies, organizing booklets, and helping customers whenever needed.

"He's very smart. He learned everything really quick," said Shah. "Very good attitude."

Miguel said he wants to go to college but he's not sure about a career yet. He knows he wants one, though. He is about to be a father and wants to give his child all he never had. "I'm having a kid so I want to make sure everything is alright," said Miguel.

During the apprenticeship, the Eliot Center works with the students on financial education and academic planning, Martelle said. The center is still looking for area businesses to take part in the apprenticeship program. Right now she has seven young people who could use jobs.

Shah said this was the first time her business volunteered to join the apprenticeship program, and so far she's glad she did.

"If they ask me again," said Shah, "I'll take a kid."

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