



Where every job gives a kid a chance

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LOWELL -- Willie slid a piece of paper under the hood of a giant copier in the back of Minuteman Press and hit a series of buttons on the copier's monitor.

"You just press this, and then you hit this," he said. A double-sided facsimile came out perfectly on the other end.

"And I just learned that right now," said Willie, beaming a 100-watt grin at store owner Philip Theriault, who nodded and smiled.

For 17-year-old Willie, whose name has been changed to protect his identity, this on-the-job learning was made possible by a new apprentice program started by the Eliot Community Re-Entry Center in Lowell, itself part of the Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps.

The new program aims to give participating youths -- who often have some criminal history -- a chance to build a resumé and a career. It is funded through a grant from the Lowell Police Department by the Senator Charles E. Shannon Community Safety Initiative.

Lee-Ann Martelle, program director at the Eliot Center, said the program aims to prepare youths for a career, not just something that will offer them temporary support. The program has funding for eight kids.

"We want them to learn a trade," she said.

That's how Willie got hooked up with Theriault. After Martelle sent out a mailing with information about the program, Theriault called up and agreed to bring in Willie to work at his Westford Street shop.

"I guess I like to help people," said Theriault. "And if I can help Lowell a little bit while I'm at it, that's great, because Lowell supports me."

Aside from the copying, Theriault said Willie has been learning to do binding, an entryway to a career that could lead him to someday becoming a pressman.

Willie's interest in the program was simple.

"I want to try and get a job," the teen said. According to Martelle, Willie's desire to work was evidenced this past summer when he kept returning to a local ice-cream stand, trying to get a job. They finally relented, but the summer job ended, leaving Willie with no way to help his mother financially in the fall and winter.

"I need to help my mom out," said Willie, explaining that his mother works two jobs and still has trouble making ends meet. So when Martelle offered this opportunity at Minuteman Press to a group of youths at the Eliot Center, Willie's hand shot up quick.

Two weeks into the eight-week program, Willie is positive about the experience.

"It's a great chance they gave me," he said. "I've already learned a lot of things here."

Willie's \$10-per-hour pay, which is covered by the Eliot Center, may prove to be just as valuable as how he spends the rest of his free time: earning his general-equivalency diploma.

As important as the things that occupy the youth workers' time may be, what they are not doing is also important. The Eliot Center cites studies that note that youth-crime levels rise between the hours of 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. That's when program participants are earning money and, hopefully, building a career.

So far, Martelle has come up against some resistance while trying to get local businesses to take on the youths.

"They just don't want to give them a chance," she said. "I think they see (the youths) as TV criminals. But they're just teenagers -- regular teenagers."

Teenagers, according to Martelle, who are ready and willing to join the work force.

"I even have former clients that have aged out of the program looking to participate in this program," said Martelle. "So any business that wants some free labor, I have the bodies."