

250 Ottawa teens wrap up first summer jobs, thanks to Youth Services Bureau program

BY LOUISA TAYLOR, OTTAWA CITIZEN AUGUST 28, 2012



Jer's Vision is an anti-bullying NGO that employed three — from left, Chanel Nakla, Zi Tian and Celina Sell — as part of a Youth Services Bureau program to help young people get their first summer job.

Photograph by: Pat McGrath, Ottawa Citizen

OTTAWA — Zi Tian was scared. The 16-year-old student had just landed his first summer job working for a small social agency he admired, and his boss was telling him how hard he was expected to work. Was he up to it?

By the end of the summer, Tian was surprised and happy to realize that the answer was a resounding 'Yes.'

Canterbury High School student Tian spent the summer at Jer's Vision, an organization that works to prevent bullying and discrimination, particularly in schools. He did indeed work hard making buttons, calling politicians, packaging supplies for delivery to schools and more. Along the way Tian grew in confidence as he picked up new skills and earned his own paycheque. A few weeks ago he went grocery shopping with his own money for the first time, buying food for his family and a box of Frosted Flakes just for him.

"I've gained so much work experience," says Tian. "I hated making phone calls, I used to be scared to call people I didn't know. Now I'm not afraid at all."

Tian is one of more than 250 Ottawa teenagers "graduating" Wednesday from their first summer jobs, all of them made possible by a program run by the Youth Services Bureau (YSB). The youth summer employment program offers employers summer staff for next to nothing.

Through funding from the Ministry of Children and Social Services, YSB pays the students minimum wage and covers the cost of insuring them. It also helps teens who've never had a summer job in Canada get ready for the workplace and connect with employers.

The youths are given 20 hours of training in workshops that cover workplace health and safety, how to write resumes and cover letters, important aspects of workplace culture, how to save the money they make and how to budget. Not everyone can apply. The youths have to be between 15 and 18 and live in specific parts of the city designated as priority neighbourhoods by a committee that includes the United Way, the City of Ottawa and the Ottawa Police Service. The neighbourhoods often have low average incomes compared to the rest of the city, or problems with violence or gang activity.

"The kids deal with stigma attached to them" based on where they live, says Steven Boucher, project leader of the program, part of YSB's Youth Opportunities Strategy. "Employers say, 'You're from the Banff neighbourhood? I won't hire you.' Sometimes they think the kid will be involved in gang activity, even though Banff has totally changed, it's a new neighbourhood. We take away all that. The youths in this program need the experience and that's all the employers need to know."

The program also has 60 spots available for youths who don't live in the designated areas but meet other criteria — if they've ever been in the care of the Children's Aid Society or in trouble with the law, for example; if they're thinking about dropping out of school or have already; or if their parents are on social assistance or unemployed.

This year the program took in 277 participants; 256 graduate on Wednesday.

"They've been fantastic," says Faye Estrella, 27, director of conferences for Jer's Vision and one of the agency's three full-time staff members. (Jer's Vision took in three YSB summer students.)

"The YSB students really want to be here, and that kind of enthusiasm and dedication really showed."

Other employers who took advantage of the program included stores such as Old Navy and Sirens, restaurants and a few offices, including Computer Sciences Canada in Kanata, and city-run day camps and community centres.

It's the sixth year YSB has run the program and each year the number of applicants grows. This year, more than 500 applied for fewer than 300 spots. Spots are allocated on a first-come, first-served basis starting in March. Once someone has been accepted, Boucher and his team begin to look for employers offering jobs that roughly align with the interests of the youth. Sometimes, that means making cold calls, looking for employers willing to give a kid a chance at his or her first job — at no cost to them.

“Some of the parents don't even recognize their kids by the end of the summer, they have changed so much,” says Boucher. “We hear they are more responsible, helping their families more. At the graduation it's wonderful to hear from the parents, coming in grateful for what we've done for them.”

They may have graduated, but YSB isn't quite done with them. Next month they'll be invited back for post-employment workshops.

“We ask them how was it? What did you enjoy? What problems did you have? How did it feel being on the other side of that counter?” says Boucher. “We find they get a better understanding of how things work in the community.”

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