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JFY helps poor kids find motivation and a job

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BY TED PINCUS

The statistics are provocative: an estimated 100,000 Chicago youths age 16-24 are on the streets, not in school and not employed, Robert Barnett says. And last year, only one in 10 African-American teens here was employed.

Barnett is a robust, high-energy 53-year-old African American who's doing something about it. He says the economics are even more provocative: It costs more than \$30,000 a year to maintain one inmate in prison. But a modest \$2,000 one-time investment can buy a ticket to employment for the jobless and homeless, pre-empting the desperation that often drives the crime rate.

That \$2,000 ticket -- supported purely by grants and corporate giving from the likes of FedEx, Pitney Bowes and LaSalle and Chase banks and Marshall Field & Co. -- comes free to youths who enter Barnett's Jobs for Youth/Chicago training program.

The how-to approach

JFY is the nation's largest non-profit dedicated to helping low-income or no-income kids find a good job and career momentum. Based at 50 W. Washington, the program supplies all the sadly missing ingredients vital to land employment: how to assess one's skills, how to write an effective resume, how to apply, how to prep for an interview, how to dress and do your best in the interview and then how to find the right openings.

Since its founding in 1979, JFY has trained, prepped and placed more than 25,000 youngsters in jobs, and currently more than 1,000 are in the pipeline.

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One of the products is 19-year-old Joe Phillips. Born in the South Side projects, he graduated last year from Dunbar Vocational with a strong 3.5 GPA. But with a home life beset with family problems, he and his teen siblings packed up and separately dispersed into the great inner-city diaspora. There, unable to land a job, penniless and homeless, his desperation grew, until the day someone told him about JFY.

"I took a chance," Phillips says. "I had nothing left to lose. I asked for help, and they were amazing. They fed me some donated food. They walked me into a huge closet of donated clothing, and I walked out with a jacket, slacks, dress shirt and tie.

"They put me through lots of not just lectures but tough role playing, asked me questions I had never heard before. They identified what my best skills are, and how to talk about those on a resume and in-person. Mr. Barnett and his coaches were super. They gave me self-confidence.

"One big difference between JFY and other social service agencies is follow-through and clout," Phillips says. "They don't just give you some free advice and dress you up, but they try hard to connect you. Within two weeks, I had a job interview with the LaSalle Bank. It was tense, but they hired me the same day, at a \$385-per-week salary, as a customer service rep."

He and others like him are the results of a program conducted by a paid staff of only 28, plus more than 200 volunteer coaches -- Chicago professionals and business people who do part-time training and employer contact.

One is Eric Joss, who over the past seven years has not only been a top trainer and fund-raiser but an employment-placement wizard, Barnett says. Termed a human dynamo, Joss, the general partner of Sitex Realty Group, a major Chicago industrial property investment fund, says he got tired of sitting on committees of non-profit operations, and writing checks.

"JFY offered the chance to actually be part of the delivery of services and see virtually immediate results, in motivated kids whose lives are turned around," Joss says.

Barnett says the sole qualification for trainees is that they be aged 17-24 and hold a high school or General Education Development certificate.

Adopt a new code of ethics

"About 10 percent of our kids arrive here with a police record, including some convictions," he says. "That makes our help even more crucial. They must admit their mistakes, and commit to a new code of ethics. And many of them turn out to be some of our hardest working, loyal and energetic grads.

"One of these came from prison and a halfway house, went through our program and was placed at Arby's, and today has gone on to a responsible post at a metals manufacturer. At age 25, he has an apartment, supports a mother and daughter, and returns regularly to give inspirational talks to our group."

Joe Phillips sums it all up: "The main thing they give you, above all, is the gift of hope."

Ted Pincus is a finance professor at DePaul and an independent communications consultant and journalist.