

Life Changing

Job education program for people down on luck is creating success stories

BY COURTNEY GAILLARD
THE CHRONICLE

Myles DeGraffenreid found himself in a transitional and troubled period in his life, unable to find work after a layoff at his last job as a chef. With 18 years of culinary expertise behind him, he had to temporarily seek lodging at The Bethesda Center until better housing became available for him and his family.

We have all been down on our luck like DeGraffenreid. College graduates, seasoned professionals and early retirees have all endured the tedious job search as a result of downsizing or a simple desire for a new career path. But DeGraffenreid's job search was different than most, because he did not have a home and was becoming sober.

The Bethesda Center in Winston-Salem decided to make the job search a little easier and possible for low-income people, like DeGraffenreid, on the road to work in The Reach Out Program. Determination and hard work are all that's required to succeed in this education and employment training program.

Reach Out, funded by the Kate B. Reynolds Foundation, is designed to assist homeless residents at The Bethesda Center and other area shelters in Winston-Salem and Forsyth County with seeking and maintaining employment. Donald Lowery, education specialist and training coordinator, was hired by The Bethesda Center to establish and oversee a program of this nature, and it is the first of its kind in the area.

Lowery formed this program from the ground up and has molded it to be one that trains participants in careers they choose. A progressive curriculum has been created



Lowery

around the program that allows participants to devise a personal and professional development plan to enter the work force.

Once hired, participants will receive on-the-job training while completing the required curriculum of the program over the course of six months to a year. Each participant, after working as an intern and completing the requirements of Reach Out, is given resources through Bethesda to begin planning to purchase a home or some kind of permanent housing.

One of the programs Lowery created focuses on African-American males' re-entry into the job market, because they are frequently subject to stereotypes and adversity.

"(Black males') cultural acquisitions are different from other races. This helps most brothers understand that they have some barriers and behaviors that they have to deal with that other people don't have to deal with because they're carrying a lot of excess baggage," said Lowery about the UJIMA Male Education Program. UJIMA originates from one of the seven days of Kwanzaa. "Ujima" means connective work and responsibility.

Although no one aspires to live a life in poverty, some people see no way out of it and make no attempt to change their lifestyles.

"In the first 30 days of the program under case management the person is scrutinized closely to determine if they are trying very hard to make progress," said Lowery, who explained that oftentimes homeless people fall victim to their adverse life circumstances and become complacent, pessimistic and anti-social.

Regardless of which shelters participants come from, they must be screened and meet mandatory program requirements, which include drug testing, completion of an aptitude test, meetings with a case manager. Each participant must possess a high school diploma or GED.

"A lot of people think that most homeless people are drug addicts and alcohol abusers, but that's not the case. Most people that are homeless are homeless because they can't find employment due to other barriers, and, believe it or not, unaffordable housing," Lowery said.

Feeling that DeGraffenreid might be ready to get back to work, Lowery approached him at the center about The Reach Out Program.

The Hawthorne Inn needed a p.m. chef in November of last year and DeGraffenreid was hired. He is responsible for preparing all of the food for the inn and the Bayberry Restaurant. Lowery considers DeGraffenreid to be a model participant of Reach Out and dotes on him and his progress like a proud father.

DeGraffenreid credits executive chef Joe Baldwin at The Hawthorne Inn for opening the door of opportunity to



Myles DeGraffenreid, a chef at the Hawthorne Inn, poses with the facility's executive chef, Joe Baldwin. DeGraffenreid has found success through the Bethesda Center program.

him so that he can continue his line of work in the culinary world.

"The glass is always half-full as far as Baldwin is concerned and that is exactly what he tells his kitchen staff at The Hawthorne Inn. Baldwin says that "we serve a second-chance God" and that is why he had no qualms about hiring DeGraffenreid.

"We don't look at the past. We look at today. The Bible says we don't judge a man by his past," Baldwin said.

If more people were willing to take and give chances as Baldwin did, DeGraffenreid believes many skilled workers would not be overlooked because of mistakes or unlucky circumstances in their lives.

"Everybody has been caught in something in their life. Everybody has a skeleton and something they need to work on; nobody is infallible. When you have people that have their arms open in programs like The Reach Out Program and people like Joe Baldwin who will let you be you and work and have such a great time in getting their lives

together, it's just wonderful," said DeGraffenreid, who attributes his success first and foremost to God and the wonderful people at The Bethesda Center and the Hawthorne Inn.

It may appear that a program such as Reach Out goes to great lengths to accommodate homeless people in a world where opportunities seem endless. Surely there is always a vacant position at the supermarket or gas station and there is bound to be a need for a stock person in a retail store and any business can use a custodian, right? With the volatile job market and unemployment rate, homeless people face the economic roller coaster like the rest of us, but with little to no resources and skills behind them, they are left at the bottom of the barrel.

Reach Out could be considered the closest thing to a solution to the problem of poverty at large. However, where assistance is to be given to people in need, funding must first be available so that agencies such as The Bethesda Center can help people purchase books for classes to complete unfinished education

or give them access to computer labs to research jobs or create résumés.

"We cut out all of the barriers that stop people from getting to where they need to get so they don't have an excuse," said Lowery. He also said that the success of the program is good because people want to do for themselves. Because of the intense nature of Reach Out, usually no more than five people are in the program at one time. Since the program's inception in October of last year, it has maintained a success rate of 100 percent, Lowery said.

Cooperation from the business community is another critical element to the success of a program such as Reach Out. Businesses must be willing to train and work with low-income and relatively inexperienced people who desire and deserve a second chance. The Hawthorne Inn, Adams Mark Hotel, Shelco General Contractors Corp. and Jackson Auto Works are among the local businesses that participate in the program.

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This project is part of a statewide initiative developed by the North Carolina Arts Council to present the dance company throughout the state of North Carolina. The dance residency project is supported by grants from The Winston-Salem Foundation Echo Fund, Life Without Reader's Digest Fund and Mr. Charles H. Babcock, Jr.

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