

San Francisco Chronicle

Year Up Students Learn Business and Life Skills

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Not long ago, Beaunca Wilson passed her time hanging out with drug dealers and users, feeling like she had no plans and even fewer options.

Today, the 20-year-old single mom, a former foster youth who lives in Oakland, has traded her sweats for business attire and is spending her days learning how to use Excel spreadsheets and network at events.

"I'm learning about information technology and learning things like how to greet people, how to show respect even if you don't get it, and what language is appropriate for professional settings," said Wilson. "This is a new and wonderful world for me."

Wilson is one of 40 students ages 18 to 24 participating in a new program



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Student Byron Frank, 18, takes notes during a Year Up business communications class in San Francisco.



Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

Portraits of students in Year Up who have been placed with San Francisco companies.

in San Francisco that combines the hard skills of intensive computer training with softer skills of how to shake hands, make eye contact and send professional e-mails.

This month, Year Up celebrated the first anniversary of its founding. Students with high school diplomas or equivalency degrees attend the program for free for one year. The first half of the year is spent in class and the second half in apprenticeships at companies including Wells Fargo, Kaiser and Salesforce.com. Students can earn \$10,000 and college credits.

The San Francisco chapter is part of a national program - with offices in six states - founded in Boston in 2000 by Gerald Chertavian, a former Wall Street banker. Chertavian's motivation for Year Up came from his time spent volunteering with the Big Brother Big Sister program.

Finding jobs

An estimated 85 percent of Year Up graduates find jobs within four

months of graduation and earn on average \$15.59 an hour, the company said.

The San Francisco chapter was started by Jay Banfield, a former development manager at Oracle Corp. who built up the company's corporate volunteer program and participated in the creation of the Clinton administration's AmeriCorps program.

"I grew up on public assistance," Banfield said. "I was raised by my mom and my grandmother. There were a lot of people who gave me opportunity because they thought it was the right thing to do. I think of my first employer, my scholarship to Stanford, my start at Oracle. What I've seen in my career is that there is a market failure on one side and a community failure on the other side."

Year Up, on Spear Street, not far from the Financial District, has seven full-time employees and a

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Beaunca Wilson, 20 (left) entrepreneur Jay Banfield, Dazy Afalava, 21, Karey Hollinquest, 22, and Carl Chatman, 21, have a discussion at Year Up in San Francisco.

first-year budget of \$660,000. Funding has come from the national office, corporate sponsors and local philanthropists. Corporations typically spend \$20,000 to underwrite the program for one year. The first class of 23 students started on Sept. 2. Of those, 18 were placed in internships. The second group of 40 students began their classroom work on March 2.

On a recent day, 16 students sat in a business communications class as teacher Debra Perrin led a discussion on how to give feedback in specific, caring and selective ways.

"In the business world, you're going to need to know this," said Perrin, who then revisited a discussion on "code switching." Several students raised their hands to explain the meaning of the term. "It's adapting to your new environment, switching the way you talk and behave, the clothes you wear, so you fit into a new environment," one student said, as Perrin nodded.

Students who join Year Up sign a contract agreeing to a number of things, from arriving and leaving precisely on time to wearing professional attire. For men, that means slacks, belts, and a shirt and tie.

"We have students who start with us and they need us to show them how to tie a tie," said Banfield, adding that donated business clothing is available to students.

After class, several students spoke of what Year Up already has brought to them.

John Menjivar, 24, said he likes the feeling of coming out of the BART station, wearing a suit and tie and carrying a briefcase. "Someone hands you a newspaper, and they look at you in a certain way," he said. "You hold your head high."

'Changed my life'

Carl Chatman, who is 21 and lives in the lower Fillmore, where he said he is surrounded by people who are into

"robbing and selling drugs," said he is finally back to making his grandmother proud. "When I started attending Year Up, I would come home and tell my grandmother I got an 85 percent on my test. My experience at Year Up has already changed my life. I am honored to be in this program."

For Karey Hollinquest, 22, who lives in Richmond and spent his youth in foster care, Year Up may provide a way to make it on his own.

"Through foster care, I learned I have no one to rely on but myself," he said. "I feel good now. My friends see me in my nice clothes and ask why I'm dressed like this. I feel like I'm even motivating them to do better."

Corporate sponsors say they are pleased with the program and the apprentices.

"I've been thrilled with the program," said Ginny Kraus, a chief technology officer at Wells Fargo. She has apprentices from Year Up who are working on network and desktop services.

"They arrive extremely energetic and they've been well prepped for the do's and don'ts of the corporate world," Kraus said. "At the end of their apprenticeships, we anticipate we will be hiring several students."

More information

For information on Year Up, call (415) 512-7588 or visit www.yearup.org. Applications are being accepted for the next class, which begins Sept. 2 and graduates in July 2010.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/03/29/BU4K16IUMA.DTL>