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‘Year Up Chicago’: Taking people from poverty to a professional career—just one year later

By Bianca Herron
Defender Staff Reporter

According to Year Up Chicago, the city is home to 65,000 young adults who do not have access to livable wage jobs and postsecondary education. Also, unemployment rates for those in the specified age group who are minority exceed 50 percent, with African-American males exceeding 50 percent.

Year Up’s mission is to “close the opportunity divide” by providing urban young adults with the experience, support, and skills that will empower them to reach their potential through higher education and professional careers.

The one-year intensive training and education program provides high school graduates and GED recipients, between the ages of 18-24, with a combination of hands-on skill development and corporate internship opportunities.

Year Up Chicago’s Executive Director, Alan Anderson, said that when he tells people about Year Up, most say it sounds too good to be true.

“The program is completely free to students,” Anderson said. “They also earn an educational stipend while in the program. We have a lot of successful business people who come in as volunteers to support our students by telling their stories, speaking with them, networking, giving resume critiques, and mock interviews.

That’s in addition to clinical personnel who are already on site to manage and help with any of the challenges students may face prior to the start of the program.”

Rebekiah Williams, 20, a Year Up participant, said when she first found out she didn’t have to pay to be in the program, she thought it was a scam.

“I went to the open house, I learned a lot, and it seemed like an awesome opportunity,” Williams said. “I began the application process and it’s been going well ever since. I am now an IT Change Coordinator intern at Exelon. Right now I’m providing back end support for applications, and doing a lot of coding and computer programming.”

The first six months of the program are spent in a classroom. Year Up gives students the opportunity to earn 18 college credits through its partnership with City Colleges of Chicago—Harold Washington College. Some of the classes students participate in are business writing, hardware repair, desktop and network support, conflict resolution and negotiation, and investment operations.

The last six months of the program are spent at an internship with one of the 40-plus Year Up corporate partners in Chicago. Some of their partners include Bank of America, JP Morgan Chase & Co., Accenture, and Comcast.

Year Up participant DeAngelo Brandon, 25, just recently started his internship at Union Bank of Switzerland (USB) where he’s a project manager.

“My experience with Year Up has been amazing,” Brandon said. “In the program I was taught how to work on my communication skills, as well as technology skills pertaining to hardware and software. I’m gaining skills that I can actually apply in real life for real work situations in order to gain a great career.”

Although Year Up was founded in Boston in 2000 and has 13 locations across the country, the Chicago chapter was started in 2010 and by year end will have served more than 500 participants. Nationally, Year Up will have served 10,000.

Anderson said the program stresses high expectations of its participants.

“Every student when they join the program must sign a contract,” he said. “It stipulates things like timeliness, appropriate attire, and being able to collaborate effectively. If they violate the contract, we have a demerit system, so every student begins with 200 points.

If you deduct your point total to zero you fire yourself. We use that language specifically because we’re intentional about not having a child-parent dynamic. We want our students to feel like they’re in a professional environment just like any other professional norm.”

In order to achieve what year up calls a “positive outcomes,” a Year Up Chicago graduate must either be working with a livable wage rate of $15 per hour or continuing their postsecondary education, according to a Year Up brochure.

Since Year Up Chicago began in 2010, their graduates have reached 89 percent positive outcomes.