Business partnership formed to offer internships to youth in the community

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For one local group of teenagers in foster care, this summer might play a larger role in positively influencing their career paths than they would’ve expected.

Community Based Care of Central Florida, a prominent regional child welfare service agency, has teamed up with CareerSource Central Florida and their Career Connections Youth Program to create a summer internship program which will last four to seven weeks, depending on each teenager’s scheduled hours.

“This partnership developed because we have ongoing partnerships that are helping to foster kids throughout the year and we noticed there was a need for a summer program and that’s when we kind of collaborated together,” said Jason Liez, outreach manager of CSCF.

The Career Builder Program, as the pilot program is being called, allows youth in foster care ages 16 to 19 to gain hands-on work experience primarily in the STEM and skilled trade fields, such as construction, manufacturing, engineering and research.

“It’s helping to break the cycle they [teens] have grown up in by giving them a chance to succeed,” said Maureen Brockenbrough, vice president of CBCCF.

Most young adults who grow up in foster care have had difficult pasts and lack the guidance and support necessary to be given equal opportunities when it comes to educational options and career paths.

Now this summer’s program is helping to open up the playing field for those young adults through hands-on training and job-site mentorships. The teens will also be paid minimum wage.

“The maximum through the program they can work is 30 hours a week for seven weeks,” Brockenbrough said. “We’ve got a four week program so the kids can work anywhere between 30 and 40 hours a week.

This summer’s group is 18 teenagers, ages 16 to 19. They were then broken down into smaller groups depending on the field and company they’re interning with.

Tim Smith, Chief Operating Officer of 15 Lightyears, an electrical contracting company, currently has four of those teenagers under his wing and working side-by-side with him and his company. Jesus, Dayvion, Kevin and Javonte get to spend their internship learning and gaining experience in the skills trade field.

“It’s something we’re always looking forward to getting involved with in youth education,” Smith said. “Especially when it comes to workforce. We’re in a labor shortage right now, so anyway we can help, whether it’s our industry or any other industries, help assist that shortage and taking some of these young guys and pushing them through this training program not only benefits us but we’re introducing them to the construction industry as a whole.”

The teens have been able to learn and experience a variety of hands-on training at 15 Lightyears. They’ve done different types of building performance testing, blow door tests and other code enforcement inspections.

Smith has also brought the boys along to important Orange County inspector meetings and they’ll get the opportunity to visit and tour the Amway Center and Orlando City Soccer Stadium in the coming weeks to learn about sustainability efforts in arena facilities.

“With everything the boys have been able to learn and experience, they of course have their own personal takeaways from the internship so far,” Dayvion said.

“Going out into the field and just being with the techs, like actually seeing what they do and actually doing what they do,” Kevin said.

Dayvion said he had an equally open-minded takeaway of his experiences so far too.

“It’s an opportunity to learn new things,” Dayvion said. “Meeting new people in the workplace and understanding the different systems and things they use to get things done around the office.”

CBCCF and CSCF will look to continue this summer’s internship program for years to come and have it increasingly spread throughout the community.

“Our goal long-term is to really address the issue of limited awareness and experience and so we want to create a holistic program that starts as young as 12 and 13 as kids transition through middle school into high school, to introduce them on an ongoing basis to career opportunities outside of a social worker or lawyer, things they most normally see in their life experience,” Brockenbrough said.

For now, the ultimate goal of the Career Builder Program to develop and support educational and career opportunities for young adults in foster care seems to be in reach.

The four teens interning with 15 Lightyears are learning and gaining experiences that were once unavailable to them.

“We’re finding things you never think you could’ve been a part of,” Dayvion said. “[The program] will help me further down my career path to open up new doors and opportunities that I could venture into.”