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# In the inner city, a summer job can be a lifesaver

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Lyonel  
Ericastilla

### PROVIDENCE

A part-time summer job may have saved Anthony Ericastilla's life.

The teenager struggled through his freshman year at Hope High School. He skipped school, hung out with gang members and was disrespectful to his parents, immigrants from Guatemala who had moved to the city's Silver Lake neighborhood in search of a better life.

Anthony's mother, Corina Barraza, was at wit's end. She turned to the Institute for the Study & Practice of Nonviolence, in South Providence, for help. The institute welcomed Barraza and the staff expressed concern for her plight. They assigned three streetworkers to her son and helped him get a job in the agency's Beloved Community Summer Jobs Program.

Last summer, Anthony worked for the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council maintaining the bike path, painting signs and performing other odd jobs.

"It was a beautiful experience," said his teary-eyed mother. "He started to change immediately. He threw away the gang clothing that his friend had given him."

On Monday, 95 girls and boys from Providence between the ages of 14 and 18 years old began summer jobs at more than 30 city agencies and private businesses, including Butler Hospital, Bank of Rhode Island, Amos House, the Providence Police Department, WPRI-TV Channel 12 and the Community Boating Program.

The summer jobs program is the second-largest in Providence behind the Recreation Department, with 200 jobs.

All of the teenagers live in the city and many of them are considered “at risk,” because they have been a problem in their neighborhoods, schools or they have had run-ins with the police. Others are simply poor teenagers who need jobs.

The jobs program, which runs six weeks and pays the teenagers \$7.40 an hour, requires participants to spend 20 hours a week at the workplace and another five hours in nonviolence training, which includes workshops on gang violence, healthy eating and living, and pregnancy prevention.

“For some of our kids the summertime can be the difference between life and death,” said Teny Gross, executive director of the Institute for the Study & Practice of Nonviolence. “A job gives them the opportunity to learn life skills that they can put to use in their everyday lives.”

Gross, city officials and the police have been concerned about the potential for a violent summer in the city, citing gang violence, idle youth and a poor economy. At a number of public appearances, Gross had said that a “perfect storm” is brewing in trouble spots such as the West End, Smith Hill and the South Side.

The statistics back Gross’ claim:

In the past week, two teenagers, Virgilio Rojo, 17, and Jeffrey Lopez, 19, have been killed in unrelated shootings. Thirty-five people have been shot in the city this year, nearly double the 18 recorded in the first six months of 2007.

The police estimate that there are 1,400 gang members and associates in the Providence metropolitan area and Southeastern Massachusetts. The most vulnerable candidates for gang recruitment are idle youth in their early teens.

Providence is the third poorest city in the country for youth under the age of 18, and as a result, city teenagers are at a greater risk for being victims of violent crimes. The 2000 census reported that 40.5 percent of the youth in Providence lived in four-person households where the annual family income was less than \$17,500. Only Brownsville, Texas, a city on the Mexican border; and Hartford, Conn., were ranked lower than Providence.

Providence tied for third with New Orleans.

Providence police Maj. Stephen M. Campbell, who oversees the detective division, said that summer job programs are critical in reducing youth violence. He commended the nonviolence institute for placing teens in summer jobs.

“I think it’s a tremendous gift to the kids,” he said. “With the summer here and the youth of the city not having that school structure, it’s really critical for these kids to have some meaningful purpose during the day.”

At a recent orientation program in the basement of a library on the South Side, representatives from local agencies and businesses learned what to expect from the teenagers who will be working for them. It was an eye opener for many of them.

Heather Gaydos, the director of the institute’s youth program, said that this was the first job for most of the teenagers. She said that many have no structure in their homes or day-to-day lives. Gaydos and others running the orientation said that the employers have to make sure the teenagers arrive on time,

turn off their cell phones and wear proper clothing.

Last summer, one youth arrived at his first day of work wearing his favorite T-shirt, bearing an image of Black Panther leader Huey Newton toting a sawed-off shotgun.

The program administrators are careful about where the teenagers are placed. For example, a boy with links to the Smith Hill-based Laos Pride street gang cannot work on enemy turf such as the West End, home of the Young Bloods and Hanover Boyz street gangs.

The institute's streetworkers, most of whom are former gang members or felons, stop by the workplace each week to see how things are working out. They also pass along information to the employers about problems the youths may have at home or on the street. Those issues can affect someone's job performance.

Linda Muller, activities director at Bannister House, in Providence, and Park View Nursing Home, in Cranston, said that her organization is providing eight jobs this summer. She said that most of the residents at Bannister House are between the ages of 45 and 60 and they suffer from drug and alcohol abuse. She said that many of them are HIV-positive and are dying from AIDS.

Muller said that some of the teens are fluent in Spanish and they will play games and participate in other activities with the residents.

"They really develop a connection with them and the bond becomes really strong," she said. "It's kind of a neat exposure to them."

The Providence Police Department also got involved in the program this year. Michael O'Toole, a civilian programs administrator, said that three youths will be assigned to police substations in the Chalkstone Avenue, Hartford Avenue and Lockwood Plaza neighborhoods. They will field complaints, handle paperwork and get involved in projects such as neighborhood cleanups.

O'Toole said the experience might get them interested in police work or some other form of community service.

Last week, a group of youths gathered at the Providence Academy of International Studies on Thurbers Avenue to talk about their new jobs. They were excited and nervous about the opportunity.

Chantorn Khunpasee, 15, an art student at Feinstein High School, was looking forward to working with children at City Arts on Broad Street. The rail-thin Cambodian boy said that he was running with a bad crowd until streetworker Ray Duggan set him on the right path. He said that the summer job will keep him off the streets.

"I'm excited because it's a good program," Khunpasee said. "If I wasn't here, I would be gangbangng. Getting into trouble."

Alexandra Polanco, 16, will work this summer as a receptionist at the institute's Homicide Victims Center in Cranston. She is a student at the Met School and interested in pursuing a career in social work. Polanco, who lives in the city's Manton neighborhood, said that she plans to save some money and help her mother "pay the bills."

Anthony Ericastilla's little brother, Lyonel, 14, landed a job at the Mount Pleasant branch of the public

library. He likes to read Harry Potter and he's looking forward to making money and buying his own cell phone.

Meanwhile, his big brother is back working in the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council Ranger Program. He did such a great job last summer that the agency rehired him.

"He was one of our best workers," said Lisa Aurecchia, the watershed council's program director. "He was very focused and very polite. He's a wonderful person and that's why we decided to hire him back again."

In September, the Ericastilla boys will be together as students at Mount Pleasant High School.

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