



Education

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Julia Steiny: Goodwill Industries bridges the gap between school, work with adult role models

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“Goodwill” is such a kind, non-modern idea. Rhode Island’s Goodwill Industries has roots stretching to 1863, when its predecessor organization began helping disabled veterans returning home from the Civil War.

Today, Goodwill still “believes in the power of work” as the force that inspires challenged people to become maximally independent in their lives. In the past, they supported sheltered workshops where disabled people could work and earn money, in seclusion. But these days Goodwill helps roughly 1,500 Rhode Islanders learn how to live and work independently in their own communities.

More than 300 of those 1,500 are kids, referred by school counselors for challenges ranging from autism and hard-wired learning disabilities to the more soft-wired disaffection of kids demoralized by school failure. Goodwill knows how to whet their appetites for the world of work with work experiences, instruction in useful life skills and the sweet taste of a paycheck. I spoke with several of these kids the other day.

Wearing a neat black T-shirt and a deservedly cocky smile, Ricardo explains that when he was a freshman at Central Falls High School, he had no interest in school. “I used to bunk, or slip into the bathroom and chill. When they said go to the principal’s office, I walked out the door. My focus was on the streets, on my buddies, cars, clothes.

“But then I got into this program. I don’t know what I would have done without it. It changed my whole life. I would have been locked up. Yeah, I would have gone to jail.”

As with all its clients, Goodwill assessed Ricardo for two weeks, on basic academic skills, aptitude and interest surveys. He took field trips to different work sites and volunteered in several, cleaning, cooking, recycling. Those

who persist in Goodwill's program get a summer internship, more work experience, and a modest paycheck.

Now entering his senior year, Ricardo has been making honor roll. He says, "All those jobs I had; I never would have had that experience. No one I know has done any of those jobs. None of them have had as much work experience as I have."

Kids who grow up in concentrated poverty know few adult role models who work regular jobs. Goodwill's director of communication, Lori Norris, sighs, "There are a lot of Ricardos out there."

Kelly, for example, was about to drop out of high school when she found Goodwill. Last summer she worked at a daycare because she wanted to work with children. But her social skills were sorely underdeveloped. She answered questions with two, three words, and dove back into her shell. The daycare wanted people with stronger communications skills, so Goodwill coaches worked with her. "I have confidence now," Kelly reports convincingly.

Norris says, "We work hard on training the kids in the 'soft skills' that employers and industries complain about. Study after study shows that employers let go the people who can't show up on time, every day, keep their temper. We help the kids learn that it is valuable to be criticized. And we stress the connection between school work and work work. There's nothing new here; it's all about relevance. Today's content standards are supposed to get kids ready for college and work, but work readiness doesn't happen with a textbook."

Kelly learned she hated her dream job. "I am never working with kids again. I don't even want to have kids now." How many degree-holders finish their coursework only to discover they don't want to devote any more time to that subject? Goodwill has the kids taste-test work life.

Kelly says, "This summer I thought I'd try working with the elderly or people with disabilities, but I got a job as a receptionist at SuperCuts. I showed up every single day, on time. I want to be a hairdresser." SuperCuts will give her part-time employment and tons of adult encouragement to help her through beauty school. She'll be the first in her extended family to have post-secondary training.

Goodwill has ongoing relationships with about 200 R.I. companies.

Another recent graduate, Andre had always needed the support of self-contained, special classrooms. Goodwill's four years of work with him paid off when Andre decided, on his own, to take the bus from Central Falls in pursuit of a job at his favorite restaurant, Pawtucket's East Avenue Cafe. He filled out an application, interviewed and got hired — a major feat.

Rhode Island badly needs more vocational schools, programs and strategies. But many kids give up on school early, because it's too hard, boring or irrelevant, effectively ruining their opportunities for gainful work. These kids need job coaches and goodwilled adults acting as intermediaries between school and work, so they can learn how to solo productively.

Or they can join Rhode Island's roughly 20,000 disenfranchised youth, drifting in life, unattached to school or work. Goodwill charges school districts for their services, of course. But the alternative cost of social dependence in the justice system, on welfare or intensive rehabilitative services is huge by comparison.

Upon graduation, Ricardo already has a job with LifeSpan as a hospital transporter. He's become a star in his world, and speaks to groups of kids about the value of his work experience. Goodwill and LifeSpan are working on ways to enhance his leadership skills.

But he was seconds away from falling into chaos.

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