

“There is a high respect level here. People ask your opinion. I feel like I matter.” - CHRISTIE HAYNES

Christie Christie Haynes was working as hard as she could but still losing ground. Although she had overcome personal challenges, and enrolled in Open Meadows Alternative High School, she was practically homeless. The low wages she earned working at call centers and food service companies weren't enough to pay for rent. She shifted from home to home, staying with a friend one month, a boyfriend the next. She increased her hours just to survive, and pretty soon, she found it impossible to make it to class.

Then her counselor from Open Meadows called her about Corporate Connections, a program that moves 17- to 24-year-olds into higher income jobs with long-term prospects. Corporate Connections prepared Christie by helping her to develop basic office skills, and placed her in an internship at Preston Gates & Ellis, a Portland law firm, where she could gain professional experience.

“When I started at Preston Gates I made a commitment to myself,” Christie says. “I would go every day every week. I showed up early. I did the best I could. I did more than they asked me.” After her 10-week internship ended, the law firm offered her a position as a receptionist.

Before becoming involved in the program, Christie would never have considered applying at a law firm. “I would never have thought I could work there, that they'd want me,” she says. Now, she feels like a contributing member of the team. “There is a high respect level here. People ask your opinion. I feel like I matter.”

Today, Christie's life is stable. She can afford to pay rent and buy groceries. She has health insurance. She is able to save money so she can pursue her education. She thinks she might study to become a paralegal or a legal secretary. She hasn't decided. For the moment, it is nice to know such possibilities are finally within her reach.



CORPORATE CONNECTIONS

Through the Economic Opportunity Initiative, Open Meadows Alternative School has expanded the career horizon of its graduates beyond the fast food industry. Its Corporate Connections program opens the door to a world of opportunities low-income kids rarely glimpse. At large, brand-name corporations, such as Comcast or Standard Insurance, jobs come with decent wages, good benefits and the chance to advance.

Corporate Connections takes a motivated group of low-income young people who have basic literacy and computer skills, and trains them for eight weeks, 10 hours a day. The training covers everything from how to write a resumé and how to talk to an executive to how to manage personal finances. Then, when program manager Nick Knudsen thinks they're ready, they intern at one of the participating corporations for 10 weeks, working 20 hours a week. “We give them an opportunity; it's up to them to make something of it,” says Nick.

With the support of the Economic Opportunity Initiative, Open Meadows can introduce its graduates to a new realm of possibilities through Corporate Connections. “They have a whole different outlook on what they can do,” Nick says. Graduates feel like participants in the business world, not outsiders. That changes everything: their expectations, their goals, and their futures.