

Open Meadow Program Connects Students with the Business World

Two years ago, Rochelle Barry wasn't sure she would ever graduate from high school. She had tried three different high schools, dropped out a total of five times and had no clear direction for her future.

Today, Rochelle has even more than she dreamed: a diploma from Open Meadow High School in Portland, Ore., and a full-time job as an eligibility and premium processor with The Standard.

In fact, Rochelle is one of five graduates of the alternative high school who have been hired for full-time positions at The Standard. In addition, the school has helped place seven interns and a temporary employee in our downtown Portland headquarters.

For Rochelle and graduates like her, a job at a major corporation like The Standard was once almost an impossible goal. Most Open Meadow students are from low-income families, have personal obstacles to overcome and haven't been successful in traditional schools. Without extra help, these students could easily end up in minimum-wage jobs and continue their family's cycle of poverty, said Nicholas Knudsen, Open Meadow's career services director.

Open Meadow's Corporate Connections program, which The Standard helped establish, has given the school's students a new range of opportunities. Students who are accepted into the program get real-world job experience through partnerships with The Standard and local firms and organizations including Today's Staffing (The Standard's temporary employment agency), Comcast, Trail Blazers Inc., the City of Portland, Portland State University and the law firm of Bullivant Houser Bailey.

"Corporate Connections is specifically devoted to finding jobs for students who have graduated or are close to graduating," Nicholas said. "Our primary goal is to raise the assets of low-income youth — in other words, to help them find reasonable-paying jobs with benefits. We'd like



Photo: Mark Goldstein/The Standard

Rochelle Barry, eligibility and premium processor in Employee Benefits Actuarial, was a high school dropout just two years ago. Then she discovered the Corporate Connections program, which The Standard helped establish at Open Meadow, a Portland alternative high school. Now she has a high school diploma and a full-time job at The Standard.

them to find something with long-term career potential, not just fast-food jobs."

Students must apply to be part of the program, which gives them college credit at Portland State and usually an internship or job. Employees from The Standard and other partner companies help screen applicants carefully to ensure they're ready for full-time work. They also teach the Corporate Connections classes and take students on tours of their buildings after they're accepted into the program.

The three-week-long Corporate Connections training program provides students with intensive job preparation. "Most of these young people already have introductory job skills, but they've never seen the inside of a corporate

office. Our classes prepare them culturally, so they know how to handle themselves in a corporate environment," Nicholas explained. After the training, students have the opportunity to apply for internships, which last for 150 hours, at The Standard and other partner companies.

"The program really opened my eyes to the work world," Rochelle recalled, who now processes group disability enrollment forms for The Standard's Northwestern Mutual Services area. "I learned how to prepare for interviews, dress for work — even things like how to write corporate e-mails and the importance of appropriate body language at work."

Kristin Stiff Arm, the Northwestern Mutual Services supervisor who hired Rochelle, has been so impressed with Corporate Connections that she also has hired an intern and a temporary worker. In addition, she plans to mentor a younger Open Meadow

student beginning this fall.

"Before I came to The Standard 10 years ago, I worked with kids with special challenges. I love my job at The Standard, but youth issues have continued to tug at me," she said. "Working with Open Meadow and the Corporate Connections program has been a great way to connect that personal value with my job."

Kristin appreciates that we're helping improve the financial future of these young people — our company's core purpose. However, she also believes we're getting a lot in return. "We're hiring highly motivated, energetic young people who really want to work," she said. "They're great team players, too — that is greatly stressed in their Open Meadow education."

The Corporate Connections program is the latest development in a four-year partnership between The Standard and Open Meadow. In early 2002, Mike Winslow, vice president, general counsel and corporate secretary,

urged the company to "adopt" the three schools (Open Meadow includes a middle school and two high school programs) through the Portland School District's School Business Partnership program. Since then, The Standard has given electronic equipment and IT expertise, school and office supplies, and direct financial support to the schools.

Last April, employees helped clean up the school grounds as part of our 100th anniversary Days of Caring. This fall, Open Meadow is one of more than 300 nonprofits benefiting from our annual Employee Giving Campaign. Income from sales of raffle tickets and Jeans Days stickers and pins is going directly to the schools.

"It's been a great partnership for us," said Jodi Jordan, director of public affairs. "We've been able to help support them financially as well as through in-kind donations, internships and several other avenues."

Working with Open Meadow makes sense for us on many levels, she said. "Our relationship with Open Meadow is a model for us as we work with local nonprofits. We're able to support a great organization and also individuals like Rochelle who are now part of The Standard team."

Portland-area employees interested in volunteering their time can sign up to mentor high school students throughout the school year. For more information, contact Nicholas Knudsen at Open Meadow, 503.488.5165, or by e-mail at nicholas@openmeadow.org. ■

— Mark Goldstein



(From left) Open Meadow students Tanaya Lindell, Moniqua Hanson, Felicia Whitbeck, Heather Estrada and Damien Crawford all participated in the Corporate Connections program. Moniqua interned at The Standard; the others interned elsewhere but went through the three-week training course at The Standard.

Photo courtesy of Open Meadow