



Westchester Summer Jobs Program in Peril

20 April 2010

Like many people looking for work, Candis Peterson learned a few years ago that the job market wasn't so rosy -- not for a woman without a high school diploma, little experience and three children. Since employers weren't necessarily knocking on the Yonkers woman's door -- not in this economy -- she needed a break. Then she got one, landing an \$8-an-hour summer job with POP Displays USA, a Yonkers-based merchandising company, through the Westchester Summer Jobs Program. Now, a year later, the 24-year-old is a full-time employee, with health benefits, working as a junior fabricator.

"It's really given me a career choice, a choice that I never thought I'd get," said a choked-up Peterson, who spoke Monday before a crowd promoting the jobs program. "It opened the door tremendously. I don't feel I would have had this opportunity without this."

The program helps young workers earn valuable experience while providing businesses with much-needed labor, said Marsha Gordon, president and chief executive officer of The Business Council of Westchester, one of the groups organizing the effort. The push is about "preparing our future work force," she said. "It's all about job creation," Gordon said. "There are great resources in the young people. It's very important to keep our young people active and employed."

The Business Council of Westchester is working with Westchester/Putnam Workforce Investment Board, United Way of Westchester and Putnam, Westchester County and 11 youth bureaus throughout the county to place roughly 500 people, ages 18-21. Another program is for teens 14-17. The business council and youth bureaus work with businesses to find good matches.

County Executive Rob Astorino said that with so many government sources drying up, this partnership was a good way to help businesses tap a "strong talent pool that is under the age of 21." "This is a terrific opportunity for everyone to find young people who really want to work," Astorino said.

Scott Katcher, a vice president and manager of POP Displays, which hired Peterson, said it was an investment that paid off. Because Peterson was eager and reliable, she has gained valuable technical experience and is now a member of the roughly 600-member company, he said. "It's so exciting because she earned a position," Katcher said. "She's on a career path."