

Building Futures: Youth Share Their Stories of Growth and Success

Part Two: Voices from the Youth Career Center

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Behind every workforce development program are individuals whose lives have been changed through opportunity, hard work, and support. As several participants prepare to graduate from the Cumberland County Youth Career Center Program (YCC), they are reflecting on their experiences and the goals they are now pursuing.

For many participants, joining the program marked a turning point.

"When I first came to YCC, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do," said one participant, an 18-year-old female from Millville. "I finished high school but knew I needed help figuring out my future. The staff helped me build confidence and showed me options I never considered. People around me told me to pick something that didn't require a lot of education or training so that I could start working and earning money sooner. YCC staff helped me realize that, while those people might have been partially right, the jobs that I would have been able to get after completing a quick training program would barely pay above minimum wage and had little opportunities for growth. I learned that there are so many training opportunities I can take advantage of now that will open doors to a better, more financially stable future".

Through career exploration activities, job readiness workshops, and one-on-one coaching, participants have been able to identify career interests and develop plans to achieve them. Youth complete multiple assessments that gauge their aptitudes and interests to identify occupations that they would likely perform well in. Staff teach participants how to use current labor market information to identify in-demand occupations so they can map out their future career path so they leave the program knowing what to do next.

"Since a very young age, I knew I wanted to work in the medical field but didn't know in what capacity. Program staff helped me compare the training programs and details for many different occupations in the medical field. I was able to use that information to narrow it down and find the best fit for me," says another participant, a 20-year-old female from Vineland.

Others credited the program with helping them overcome personal barriers that once seemed impossible.

"When I entered the Youth Career Center program, I had dropped out of high school the previous year, had no idea what I wanted to do with my life, and was living in a homeless shelter. I had trouble getting to the center every day because the closest bus stop was a few miles' walk from the shelter. YCC staff came directly to the shelter to help me improve my basic skills and hopefully pass the GED test. While in the program, I got a job, saved a bit of money, and moved into an apartment," said another participant, a 19-year-old male from Bridgeton. "Things look so much brighter for me than they did just 6 months ago, and I contribute a lot of that to

being in the program. Staff didn't give up on me....they came back to help me even when I wasn't so motivated".

Program staff emphasizes that every participant's journey is different. Some youth entered YCC having already graduated high school but uncertain as to what lies next, while others required tutoring to increase their basic skills and prepare to take the GED/HSE test. Some program graduates plan to enter the workforce immediately, while others will continue their education, pursue vocational training, or earn industry-recognized credentials.

What makes this work meaningful is seeing young people recognize their own potential. Many come to us unsure of what comes next. Watching them leave with a plan, confidence, and a vision for their future is incredibly rewarding.

As this graduating group prepares for the next chapter, their stories serve as a reminder that investment in youth is an investment in the entire community. Through education, workforce development, mentorship, and opportunity, the Cumberland County Youth Career Center is helping build the next generation of workers, leaders, and community members.