The Day
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SUMMER MONEY



SARAH GORDON/THE DAY

Shakur Hairston, 16, a worker with New London Youth Affairs, helps Jesuam Peralta, 9, during a swimming lesson Thursday for campers with Salvation Army Boys & Girls Club at Ocean Beach Park in New London.

Jobs program a win-win for teens, employers

Younger workers help alleviate labor shortage

By ERICA MOSER
Day Staff Writer

Zebulun Tucker sat at the conference table Thursday afternoon at the Norwich office of the production company FWRD Content, intensely focused on a graphic design project for a podcast the company produces.

It's the 15-year-old's first job.

"I wanted to get money, and I also want to get a job experience, and I wanted to get better at something I'm already good at," he said. The Norwich Free Academy rising sophomore became interested in graphic design in part from seeing thumbnails on YouTube and thinking, "I want to design things like that."

He's one of more than a dozen youth working 20 hours a week for four weeks at FWRD Content, 282 Franklin St., this summer.

It's one of more than 100 job sites in eastern Connecticut involved in the Summer Youth Employment Program, and Tucker is one of more than 380 participants, all between ages 14 and 24.

The Summer Youth Employment Program is an Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board program that EASTCONN, a nonprofit regional educational service center, conducts in partnership with New London Youth Affairs and Norwich Youth & Family Services.

According to EWIB, the number of positions available increased 33% from last year, the result of additional state funding.

Wages also are supported through federal funding from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and funding from private foundations,

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Teenagers come to the rescue during summer labor shortage

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meaning employers get additional workers without having to pay them directly. The city of New London also donated $100,000 to this year's program. Carol LaBelle, senior director of programs and special projects at EWIB, said the program got almost $1.1 million in funding this year.

Most youth make minimum wage, which recently increased to $14 an hour in Connecticut. LaBelle said different funding sources have different eligibility requirements, some of which are based on a family's income.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistic's Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator, $14 now has the same buying power as $10.84 did 10 years ago and $8.50 did 20 years ago.

Washington Post columnist Andrew Van Dam noted in a recent column that employment among teens ages 16 to 19 plunged when millennials were in this age group, falling to 26% when the youngest millennials turned 16 in 2014, but has since risen to 33%.

EWIB Chairman of the Board Chris Jewell said in a news release that the Summer Youth Employment Program "has taken on steadily increasing importance as CT's labor force wrestles with critical workforce shortages. The ability to facilitate a job opportunity for our young people by bridging gaps such as lack of transportation and lack of experience is an investment that will pay dividends."

Cyndi Wells, coordinator for youth employment and training at EASTCONN, said many of the labor shortages are in summer camps, summer school and day cares. She added that some businesses are interested in training youth to be lifeguards, another area with big labor shortages.

Wells and George Lopez, a program assistant who works for New London Youth Affairs, said they've seen a lot more interest this year from kids on the younger end, ages 14 and 15.

Lopez is one of 15 program assistants, and Wells noted that former participants have gone on to become program assistants: "Not only were they a recipient of the program, but now they're actually teaching other youth how to do what they did," she said. Program assistants have other jobs during the school year.

Jessica Heikila is a program assistant with Norwich Youth & Family Services, and she said she's at FRWD Content every day to make sure youth are working and the records are correct.

"It's a new opportunity for them, rather than just going to work at a gym or a coffee shop, not that there's anything wrong with that," said Justin Tucker, owner of FWRD Content. Zebulun Tucker — no relation — made a thumbnail graphic for the "Bronx Baseball & Beer" podcast FWRD Content produces, and other youth have been doing research on other sports podcasts.

Working the front desk, 15-year-old Amaris Ortiz said she goes through emails and schedules things. Austin Li, 17, said his guidance counselor told him about the program, and he wanted to take the opportunity this summer to see what it's like to work in a real job.

"Some jump right into it, and some are apprehensive, I think just because they don't trust themselves," Justin Tucker said. "They've never been given the opportunity."

FWRD Content, which also has an office in Los Angeles, has produced shows such as "Duck Dynasty," "Straight Up Steve Austin," "Miz & Mrs.," and "She's the Boss."

Saving for college and getting out of the house

Addison Macdonald came into Gumdrops & Lollipops, at 334 Main St. in Niantic, with a plan.

The 14-year-old, a rising sophomore at Norwich Technical High School, wants to be an advanced practice registered nurse, and she said all the money she makes working is going into her bank account to pay for college.

She was looking for a job and at first wanted to be a lifeguard but is too young.

At Gumdrops & Lollipops, a candy store and ice cream shop, Macdonald said she is "learning a lot about customer service, just learning a lot

about the workplace environment." She's scooping ice cream, restocking and cleaning.

"We're having such a hard time finding workers, and these kids, they show up, they're here, they're reliable," owner Melinda Graus said. She said she usually has a ton of applications by Memorial Day weekend but didn't have nearly as many this year, "and it's scary, because this is our busiest time of year."

In New London, the Salvation Army Boys & Girls Club has multiple youth workers from the program, split into a morning shift at the organization's newly renovated space on Governor Winthrop Boulevard and an afternoon shift at Shaw Mansion.

Steve Manuel, executive director of the New London County Historical Society, said the program at the society's Shaw Mansion, 11 Blinman St., this year is archaeology. He said the youth workers are essential in interpreting things into Spanish for the kids, ages 6 to 12.

The camp also has involved swimming lessons at Ocean Beach Park, arts and crafts, and field trips to the Mystic Aquarium and the Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme. Each youth worker is paired with a small group of kids — playing with them, teaching them and helping Boys & Girls Club staff.

Andy Garcia, 15, said it's a new experience and something to do in the summer and gain money; in previous summers, he said he would play outside and play video games. Rodrigo Pacheco, 14, said he heard about the program from his older brother, who wanted to do it but didn't get to because of COVID-19. This is both of their first jobs.

"I wanted to get out of the house," Pacheco said.

Yanira Rosario, program director of the Boys & Girls Club, said most of the youth workers start off shy but become more empowered with each passing day. She called the program "a two-way blessing, a two-way benefit, because we receive their help, and also we give them the opportunity to have employment."

Some of the other jobs through the Summer Youth Employment Program are as an office assistant, custodian, landscape worker and library aide. There are also culinary and serving positions, at Johnny's Clam Shack, La Stella Pizzeria, Mambo's Restaurant and Shaking Crab.

Other job sites include the Drop-In Learning Center, FRESH New London, Goodwill, McKenna's Flower Shop, Norwich Fitness Center, NSA Supermarket, Rita's Italian Ice, Safe Futures, Super Saver Laundromat, and different school systems.

To learn more, visit ewib.org/summer.

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