

Future is hopeful for youth

By CAROL WATERLOO FRAZIER
Daily News Lifestyles Editor
cfrazier@dailynewsemail.com

After working in Corporate America for years, LaWana Simmons realized it was not fulfilling — she wanted something more.

She quit her job and she and a friend opened a boutique. Having some teaching experience in business schools and Sunday School, she decided to reply to an ad for a teacher for a GED program to help youth in the community.

In December 2005, Simmons opened the doors of Arbor Education Training in McKeesport. “I was the teacher and intake person and I was supposed to serve 60 kids a year. I was in the McKeesport Employment Center and everything took off from there.”

For the first two years, she was the lone person helping youth 16 to 21 earn their GED and pursue a post-secondary education. She eventually hired a youth aide and another teacher.

Because of the success of the program, the Department of Human Services in July 2009 asked her to do the same project but for youth in foster care. She now has a staff of eight to work with the young people. “I have a great staff and we all have the same passion for kids.”

Simmons said the youth who come to the site at 336 Shaw Ave. “are needy. You have to meet their needs before you can do anything else. A lot of them are homeless and they want something to eat. Some of them are moms. We have to meet those needs first.”

She cited one student who was 16, homeless and had a child when she came to the program. “She’s now in her second semester at CCAC and she loves it. A lot of youth have come here and been successful.”

Any youth 16 to 21 who meets certain financial criteria can enroll in the program. “We’ve had gang bangers here and I tell them this is a safe house, that they can’t bring anything here with them and we haven’t had any problems. One guy who was a gang banger was so smart and scored so high on his GED that ITT wanted to recruit him. In the middle of everything he went away for a year or so then came back and is now in his second semester at ITT. He wants to be off the street and comes here for bus passes and for support. It’s great when you can see that you are making a difference in someone’s life.”



Taking a break from paperwork at Mon Valley Bridge, from left, are Michelle Thomas, program coordinator; Malik Swain, industry liaison; and LaWana Simmons, program director.

Another graduate of the program is Tamiko Davis, 18, of McKeesport, who is attending Community College of Allegheny County in pursuit of becoming a registered nurse.

She was introduced to the program last June during its summer youth program, then enrolled in the GED program in July. “I left school because I had a child and I wanted to get my GED. The youth program helped me to see what having a job was like. I wanted to get my GED so I could do something else with my life.”

Davis said she’s glad she got her GED and credited the program for that. “The Arbor program is helpful and supportive and I would recommend it to others who were like me.”

A single mom with five grown children and grandchildren, Simmons said she knows what it’s like to work while raising children on your own. “I went to school and got my master’s while I was working and raising my family so I know how difficult that can be. I am able to relate to what they are going through.”

After leaving her corporate job, she said she answered her calling and became a licensed preacher. Since working at Arbor, she’s earned a second master’s. “I got my master’s in counseling psychology because when you’re working with kids like this there are a lot of issues you have to deal with. I have a spiritual background but I wanted the psychology background as well.”

While the Arbor program works with youth to help them get their GED, pursue a post-second education and find employment, Simmons said Mon Valley Bridge caters to those who are in foster care achieve independent living. That program provides flexible scheduling to accommodate students in school.

She estimates at least 300 youth have been served since December 2005. Although it’s a county-wide program, Simmons said most of the youth are from McKeesport with one or two from Duquesne or Clairton.

Simmons also said she usually serves more than 60 youth each year. “I hate to turn the kids away because you may never see them again. We have some kids come then leave after a while for whatever reason, then come back a year or two later and go through the program. We do have a lot of success stories. The best-kept secret in McKeesport is Arbor.”

Youth who enroll in either program have one thing in common — “They mostly all want to go to college, but they think they can’t,” she said. “If you have a GED, you can go to college.”

Simmons said she believes this is what she wants. “Working with youth is my passion. A lot of this I understand because I was a young mom. You can succeed, you just need someone to empower you.”

For more information about Arbor and Mon Valley Bridge, call 412- 948-1800 or visit www.arbormckeesport.com.



— Photos by Carol Waterloo Frazier/Daily News
Richard Washington teaches students at Mon Valley Bridge in McKeesport who are working toward their GED.