

Steaming up a New Start at Starbucks

A Unique Baristas Youth Skills Link Program

Most are depressed, distrustful and pessimistic with a history of substance abuse. Half have already been through the criminal justice system and a few have learning disabilities; 40 per cent have children.

All were considered at-risk youth with little hope and few options – until they entered the Baristas Youth Skills Link Program.

Three years and more than 100 saved lives. This is the short but impressive history of the award-winning Baristas Program.

Partly funded by Service Canada's Youth Employment Strategy, the Baristas program offers at-risk youth aged 15 to 30 an opportunity to develop important life and employment skills to help them lead rewarding and productive lives.

Combining seven weeks of classroom study followed by a 15-week internship at a local Starbucks café, the highly successful Baristas Program is operated by the not-for-profit Pacific Community Resources Society (PCRS), in conjunction with Starbucks Coffee Company Canada and the Surrey School District.

Nicole Neufeld, a manager of the Starbucks in White Rock, explains interns are very appreciative of the many opportunities offered by the Baristas Program. "Because many of the interns have been down on their luck for so long and suffered from various hardships, they are very willing to work hard, go the extra mile and strive to become ideal employees."

Human Resources and Development Canada funds the program, which includes paying participants \$8 an hour during the classroom time and the internship, while Starbucks provides the practical, hands-on training.

Since its creation in February 2003, the program has offered genuine hope, direction and opportunities to more than 120 youths through its intense and life-changing curriculum.

During Neufeld's three-and-a-half-year career with Starbucks, she has personally welcomed nearly 10 interns through the Baristas Program – many of whom have graduated to permanent positions either with Starbucks or other established businesses; and two have since been promoted to supervisory positions.

Given the program's focus on the retail and hospitality sector, Baristas program graduates have also gained responsible positions at Blenz, Tim Hortons, Fruits & Passion, Mariposa and other retailers.

“This program helps youth to establish a foundation of self esteem, resiliency, efficacy and motivation which are the cornerstones for vocational success,” explains John Solano, Barista's current program manager at PCRS. “Without this foundation, employability skills cannot be built and professional development cannot occur.”

Within the span of three years, this innovative public-private partnership has already had an impressive success rate. For example, more than 80 per cent of youth are gainfully employed after graduating from the program.

Considering the current labour shortage in BC and the steady numbers of at-risk youth in our city, this number is substantial.

“We’re finding this program a wonderful way to find and recruit new employees,” adds Neufeld. “Though we wish we could hire all of the graduates, it’s not possible. Generally, about half of the interns are hired on and transferred to other Starbucks locations – while the other half move on to find new and exciting opportunities.”

In addition to developing self-esteem and effective workplace habits, Baristas program graduates gain life-long employment skills they can take anywhere – including FOODSAFE, valuable first aid training, and Workplace Health and Safety certificates.

Due to the great success of this program and its many graduates, the Baristas program was recognized with the BC Career Development Award of Excellence in 2004 by the Career Management Association of BC.

“Partnerships like this (with the federal government and Starbucks) are open to everybody,” adds Solano of PCRS. “If a business or sector wants a way to give back to the community and satisfy their HR needs, we’re open to these kinds of partnerships.”

With the upcoming 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, a current labour shortage and an anticipated demand of 84,000 new workers by 2015, it is clear that programs such as this are highly necessary and invaluable to the success and well-being of our most vulnerable citizens – and to our province.