



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

## Profiles of Disconnected Youth Who Have Reengaged

### Profile #1: Juan

Juan had just started college when the best things in his life disappeared. His cousin, grandmother, and best friend, who helped him endure 15 years of family difficulties that kept him in foster care, all died within a couple of months. The toll was too much; he left school, lost his apartment, and landed on the street.

Juan worked low-pay jobs as long as they lasted and stayed with friends and relatives until he tried a Hartford community organization called Our Piece of the Pie (OPP), which had previously helped out one of his brothers. He walked through the doors in early 2016, and he's been back every day.

Reva Mingo, an OPP youth development specialist, helped Juan find a temporary apartment, evaluated his academic, interpersonal, and occupational skills, and arranged a paid internship in customer service. Then she helped him return to college, where he is now earning a certificate in administrative medical assisting, a high-demand field in Hartford and surrounding towns.

"I didn't know I needed help, but I really needed them," Juan, now 23, says of OPP. "They gave me the structure, so all of the pieces are falling together. Now I can see my future; I can see myself in the community."

Juan—and Reva—are just getting started. Permanent housing is the priority. Juan never again wants to walk the streets all night, fighting to stay awake because he has no place to sleep. He needs a stable income and enough savings for a security deposit in order to secure a place long term. A weekend security guard job fell through, but Reva has a lot of other ideas. Meanwhile, Juan started evening classes at Capital Community College.

"He doesn't have family support, so OPP finds all of the resources he needs," Reva says. "But he's very strong and he's very self-motivated. He wants to get to the place where, even though he was at the bottom, he wants to get to the top."

Near the end of 2016, Juan was on track to earn his certificate in early 2017 and can continue on for an associate's degree. An OPP workforce development specialist says the certificate is enough to virtually guarantee Juan work at a decent wage. If he learns how to drive and saves for a car, he'll be able to earn more at jobs outside the city, out of the reach of public transportation.

"Right now, it's let me get these credentials onto my resume," he says. "Then it's my turn to help myself."

## **Profile #2: Adonis**

Adonis spent his 19<sup>th</sup> birthday in prison, and his 20<sup>th</sup>. When Adonis got out, he went right back to doing what he thought he did best—selling drugs. “I’ve got no time for school; I’ve got to pay the bills,” Adonis recalls thinking. “I’m just going to go back to the same stuff I was doing before. In the neighborhood, you see all these guys, they got nice jewels and cars, they’re partying all day, and the money comes so quick. You could go to work and make \$70 a day, or you could hang out and make \$1,000 a night.”

Adonis was in court when his probation officer convinced a judge to let him try the college transition program, College Bound Dorchester (CBD). He showed up the next day.

If he continues to attend class, meet with a college readiness advisor, set goals, and make good decisions, Adonis will start at a Boston community college before he turns 22. Recently he has considered construction, computers, and social work.

CBD is part of a Boston-area network to improve educational and employment prospects for opportunity youth—young people ages 16 to 24 who are disconnected from school and work—including those who have been involved with the criminal justice system. Will Dunn, a CBD college readiness advisor, says that at first Adonis came to class just to pass the time. Will, 41, understands like few people can. As a teen, he was in a gang in the same Boston neighborhood, and served five years in prison for armed robbery and other crimes.

It took weeks of daily meetings and difficult conversations just to gain Adonis’ trust, Will says. Eventually, “his attitude turned around.” They talked about why schoolwork has to come first, how he can be a better father to his young son. At a construction site, Will explained the benefits of joining a union; he also made a case for learning to be a manager or a business owner. “It’s opening your mind up to different things,” he says. “At least you see avenues and can make a better decision on what you’re trying to do.”

CBD classes emphasize social, emotional, and employability skills as much as reading, writing, and math. “It’s hard when you start and you remember nothing,” says Adonis, who didn’t finish 10<sup>th</sup> grade. “But they eased me right in, and if I needed one on one, they met with me after school.”

“I’m never going to get those years back,” he adds, recalling birthdays in prison with “cakes” he made of honey buns and danishes. “Now I feel so much more calm. You don’t have to look over your shoulder and you don’t have to worry about nothing, like oh damn, I got a bill due next Friday. I know this is definitely going to help me. It’s been helping me already. The environment changes your mood.”