



The Times

Lessons in preparing for the world of work

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BY ALEX ZDAN

TRENTON -- A bridge was built in the city yesterday.

There was no steel involved, no workers pouring concrete or engineers rolling out blueprints. Mayor Douglas H. Palmer was joined at City Hall by educators and corporate representatives to announce a "Bridge to Employment" (BTE) for city high-schoolers.

"If you look around this room, you'll see bridges, suspension bridges," Palmer said, pointing to sepia photos of the spans made with the iron manufactured in Trenton in bygone days.

"This is a bridge to somewhere for these students."

The three-year program will allow 26 sophomores at Trenton Central High's Medical Arts Academy Campus to receive mentoring from Johnson & Johnson and Ortho-McNeil-Jansen Pharmaceuticals professionals as well as from students and faculty from the College of New Jersey to prepare for health-care careers.

Michael Bzdak, director of worldwide contributions and community relations for Johnson & Johnson, said the program is part of 11 community projects sponsored by the company in the United States, all of which cost the corporation \$100,000.

"The thing is, the time given, it's a lot bigger than the money," he said. "The whole thing is meant to bring people together."

Bzdak said the program began in 1992 as generic work-force development, and was narrowed in focus to the health-care field several years later.

About 2,000 students have gone through the program since. Bzdak said those who work in the BTE try to keep in touch with graduates as they move to work jobs in health care.

"Not for J & J necessarily, but for the industry," he said. "A couple of them come back as engineers."

Partnering with local schools, universities and towns is essential because the institutions already have roots in the community.

"Things kind of grow organically around existing relationships," he said.

The BTE training involves service projects, internships, SAT preparation, and college and company tours to give young people a feel for working in health care.

TCNJ freshman Kristina Merced is very happy with her work at Trenton Medical Arts.

"I really enjoyed working with the students, they're great to work with," she said.

Nichole Emele, a sophomore, is familiar with the situation in urban schools from growing up in Newark.

"I know how to relate to these kids," she said. "I know where they're from."

She added that working with the students allows her to take the nursing duties she learned about out of the classroom.

The college students said the program requires eight hours a week of instruction, and up to five hours per week more in preparation.

Paraphrasing a small portion of the lyrics from a song by the rapper T.I., schools superintendent Rodney Lofton highlighted the possibilities BTE offers by saying, "When you're finished, you can have whatever you like."

Trenton resident and TCNJ freshman Kathrine Avila also was enthusiastic when she spoke of the promise of the program.

"BTE is a great program, and we look forward to making it a big success," she said.

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