

Workforce program graduates its first students

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BRISTOL — As the first seven members of the joint Workforce program of Bristol Adult Education and Rowley Spring & Stamping Corp. graduated from the program Friday morning, Larry Covino, the adult education supervisor, praised them as “extraordinary students.”

“We want them gainfully employed in something that’s more powerful than a minimum-wage job, that’s a life-sustaining occupation,” he said.

Covino told how one of the students had been struggling with math in the program even as he had to work a job and take care of his family.

The student came to him saying he was considering quitting the program. Covino met with the math instructors for both adult ed and Rowley Spring to try to work things out for him.

When the student made the decision to stick with it, “to me it was one of the highlights in this program,” Covino said. “Because this is going to be life altering for him, and for all the ones that come after him.”

The pilot program began three months ago, with the students working on their GEDs through adult ed and getting manufacturing and general workplace training through Rowley Spring, which shares a building with adult ed on Redstone Hill Road.

The Workforce students — Rene Ruiz-Antonio, Steven Corley, Merrill Cyr, Efrain Melendez, Jodi Redwitz, Lamar Russ and Joshua Soto— are all from Bristol. They had 60 hours of classroom training through adult ed and then 54 hours of hands-on training through Rowley Spring.

Russ admitted that he was the one who struggled so much with math. He credited his teachers for pushing and giving him the opportunity to advance in life.

Soto said perseverance helped him make it through the program, even when he had to walk from the other side of town to get to his classes. He thanked his teachers and family for telling him “don’t give up, just keep going, you will get through this.”



Rowley

12/19/2014 Mike Orazzi | Staff Larry Covino, Supervisor of the Bristol Adult Education, during graduation ceremony for workforce participants at Rowley Spring in Bristol on Friday morning.

Redwitz said she had walked up to the adult ed doors at least four different times before getting the courage to walk through. As a mother of three young children, she knew she needed to finally get her GED and learn valuable job skills, but she was scared at first.

Now, she said, she has learned so much and met some wonderful people along the way.

“If I had known then what I know now I wouldn’t have been so scared,” Redwitz said. “I knew when I walked through those doors for the first time that my life was going to change but I had no idea just how much my life was going to change.”

“My grandmother always said ‘When opportunity knocks on your door you better answer your door,’ and that’s exactly what I did,” she added.

Jim Albert, president and CEO of the Central Connecticut Chambers of Commerce, noted that manufacturing has made a big comeback in the area recently, but manufacturers have trouble finding qualified workers who also have the proper work ethic.

There have been a lot of workforce program models in existence, but this one has many unique pieces to it, including that is fully funded by many community partners, Albert said.

Covino noted that two “excellent candidates” had to drop out of the program at the beginning because it conflicted with their work schedules.

“One of the things we’re working toward is additional funding that maybe could supplement that for these individuals that are under-employed or unemployed in order to help them to help their families,” he said.

Michael Schroeder, editor and publisher of The Bristol Press, made a financial contribution to the program at the graduation ceremony.

“These students have invested in themselves, both in terms of time, effort, and commitment to a new career, and one that will serve them all the rest of their lives,” he said.

“We didn’t want to see anyone that got into this program not able to go through it because of a financial need,” Schroeder said. “We know there are plenty of people that could benefit from what you guys have blazed a trail for.”

Covino the next group of Workforce students are being recruited, to begin in March at the latest, and a portion of the program will be opened up to high school students and recent graduates.

The seven students also received a citation from Bristol’s state representatives. State Rep. Whit Betts, R-Bristol, invited them to come up to the state Capitol sometime to be introduced to the General Assembly as an example of a workplace success story.