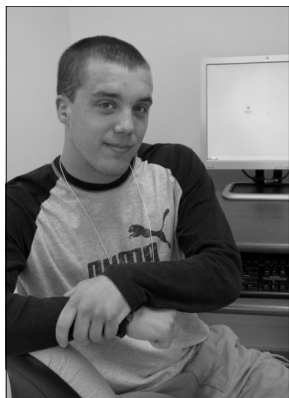


Profiles of Hope



At 21 years of age, Joshua Grafeld loved the outdoors, and had worked as a butcher, a camp counselor and an archery instructor. However, as a high school drop-out, he increasingly found himself holding down dead-end jobs due to his lack of education. A supervisor noticed Joshua's potential and recommended that he check out Project Self-Sufficiency's Youth Connections program.

Statistically 55% of the nation's students between the ages of 15 and 19 will successfully complete high school and receive a high school diploma. Another 15% will receive their GED or high school equivalency before the age of 24, which in total accounts for 70% of students that will graduate annually. The remaining 30% of high school students will drop out of school before reaching the 12th grade, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

There are many significant reasons teens drop out of high school before graduating, ranging from peer pressure to lack of parental support to failure to address special needs. A feeling of boredom or lack of engagement at school is another common problem. While the reasons for dropping out are varied, it is predictable that those without a high school diploma will fare worse economically than their peers. Without a diploma, they will have a difficult time finding meaningful work. High school drop outs will earn less, have poor health, live in poverty and have children at an early age, many of whom will also grow up to be high school drop outs, according to EduGuide, a non-profit organization that works with schools and other non-profit groups.

The free Youth Connections program at Project Self-Sufficiency is designed for youth who are no longer enrolled in school, or those who have graduated from high school but who may be struggling with literacy. Youth Connections helps guide participants through GED testing, job training, and placement at a work site, in college or the military. Eligibility guidelines for the Youth Connections program are strict. Participants must be local residents between the ages of 16 – 21, who fall below the federal poverty guidelines. Male participants are required to register with the Selective Service System in order to qualify.

Once a participant is accepted into the program, they can expect to undergo a battery of assessment testing followed by help with obtaining their GED, life skills training, pre-employment training, and other remedial education efforts. Childcare, lunch and limited transportation assistance is available to all participants. Upon completion of their education, participants will be placed in internships, followed by placement in paid employment, college or the military. Follow up support will be provided by Project Self-Sufficiency staff to ensure that the newly-minted workers are faring well in their positions.

During his high school years, Joshua experienced prolonged absences, causing him to fall far behind his classmates. Like many others who have dropped out of high school, Joshua floundered for awhile, spending several years working at various odd jobs.

The Youth Connections program's flexibility was a big selling point for Joshua. "The hardest part of the program for me was balancing work and classes," noted Joshua, who had to leave early from Project Self-Sufficiency in order to go to work at the Sussex County YMCA. "The program is very flexible and they work with you."

As part of the Youth Connections program, Joshua worked as an intern at a local camp for children with diabetes. He learned how to administer payroll, raise funds, handle paperwork and other tasks associated with running a camp. He plans to attend Sussex County Community College and eventually wants to work as a Camp Director. "This is a very supportive program and everything is free. It will help you start your life. It opened up another door for me to start over, and it helped me to establish connections which I will need some day."

Joshua Grafeld