

Profiles of Hope



Shannon Bentley once dreamed of becoming a tattoo artist, but at age 18 she was a high school drop-out and going nowhere. She heard about Project Self-Sufficiency's Youth Connections program and decided to give it a try. 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. Once a participant is accepted into the program, they can expect to undergo a battery of assessment testing followed by help with attaining 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.

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.

"High school was never really my thing," noted Shannon, who dropped out during the last semester of her senior year of high school. "I never had a problem with grades, but I had a lot of family issues, so I was out a lot." Like many others who have dropped out of high school, Shannon floundered for awhile. Mostly, she just hung around the house.

The ability to customize the Youth Connections program to each individual was a big selling point for Shannon. "They are really cooperative and understanding of your situation. They help you to address your weak points. I felt like it was kind of like being home-schooled, in a way. They showed you how to do things that you didn't really understand. It was a good program."

Shannon entered the Youth Connections program with vague ambitions of becoming a tattoo artist, but changed her mind once she met with a career counselor at the Youth Connections program and began to seriously consider her options. She has enrolled in Dover Business School, where she will be pursuing a degree as a medical assistant. In an added twist, she will be attending the program alongside her mother who has decided to pursue the same degree. In the meantime, Shannon will begin her Youth Connections internship at a local art gallery. Both mother and daughter are set to start the medical assistant program at Dover Business School during the summer. "She is proud that I am doing something with my life," added Shannon.

Shannon Bentley