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I'd like to thank the academy...

March 17, 2010



**H.R. Director Kristin Shutler and Workforce Advantage Academy student Geneva Culbertson review case files at deBeaubien, Simmons, Mantzaris & Neal LLP law firm.
Photo by Karen McEnany-Phillips — The Observer**

**By Karen McEnany-Phillips
Observer Staff**

Geneva Culbertson dreams of caring for exotic animals such as cheetahs or polar bears. But for now the fearless 17-year-old is happy sorting, shredding and scanning client records at a downtown Orlando law firm.

The student body president and yearbook editor will soon graduate from Workforce Advantage Academy, an Orange County charter school where she takes classes two to three days a week and works a paid internship the other two days.

"This schedule gives me time to study but I get to work too," Culbertson said. "I've learned so much at school and through my job."

The innovative program is the vision of Kenneth E. Hartsaw Jr., whose military and business careers included 30 years of youth job training and education. He founded Workforce Advantage Academy, a nonprofit organization in 2003.

By its fifth year, the academy's stunning academic performance won it an unprecedented 15-year extension.

"When students get here, most have not passed the FCAT, have fallen behind and are off track to graduate. We have over 400 graduates, a 90 percent graduation rate with improvements in both FCAT and grade point averages." Hartshaw said.

As part of Orange County Public Schools, students attend for free, however Hartsaw admits most juniors and seniors arrive with reservations and most have never worked.

What turns them around? Small class sizes of 15 to 20 students with certified teachers who pick up on student moods, struggles and successes allows problems and strengths to be identified early on.

The curriculum combines classes taught in any Orange County high school and business courses that prepare them for paid internships and real world challenges. Students work with household budgets, business plans and consumer math. They learn interviewing, communication and workplace skills, including tips on appearance, being on time and filling out applications.

"When I finally got my job last January, I was prepared," Culbertson said.

Internships span areas of employment including law, manufacturing, construction, business administration and retail.

Hartsaw said many students come from economically challenged families or have become lost at high schools with 4,000-plus students.

"This is not an alternative school," Hartsaw said. "When people come here, they begin to turn their lives around. We give them choices and the tools to be successful."

His graduates go on to attend community colleges, universities, technical schools, the military or full-time work.

Culbertson plans to attend Valencia Community College then pursue a degree in zoology and biology.

Kristin Shutler, firm administrator and human resources director at deBeaubien, Simmons, Mantzaris & Neal LLP has been working with the academy's students from its inception and commented on Culbertson's performance.

"Geneva is the pinnacle of a star — she is determined, bright and focused with a great work ethic."

Shutler said students admit that a smaller school with a career focus has rescued them from the social pressures of traditional high schools. Employers win by paying trainable employees a moderate wage without extensive benefits. The unique partnership between employers and the academy differentiates from other teens who struggle alone to balance a job with classes and extracurricular activities.

Allison Okamoto, a junior at the Academy, is considered "invaluable" by her office manager Dottie Geniotto at Lake Howell Chiropractic Clinic in Maitland.

"She's my right arm," Geniotto said. "Her computer skills are awesome, which allows me to take care of my other duties."

Okamoto designs flyers, types clinical notes, creates labels and scans records. Next year as a senior and honor student she hopes to have dual enrollment at Valencia Community College. "This is a good opportunity to get a job and your education," Okamoto said.

When faced with a 30 percent budget cut, Hartsaw increased his student enrollment and raised private donations. He has helped fund student proms, scholarships and trips to college campuses, Washington, D.C., and New York City. His enrollment is at full capacity with more than 200 students sometimes with a waiting list.

"No one is alone here," Culbertson said. "This school helps you focus on yourself, not on someone else's problems. It's easy to get close to the staff because they help you."

Workforce Advantage Academy

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