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Apprenticeship helps teen gain employment

By Taneika Duhaney / Fairfax County Times
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The future of work looks different for many people. As economic constraints persist and college costs increase, some youths pursue apprenticeship training to make their dreams come true.

"I want to be successful and financially stable," said Alexandria Seaport Foundation apprenticeship graduate Anthony Garcia. "I also want to own my own business one day."

To make his dream a reality, Garcia builds his toolbox brick by brick.

After completing the Alexandria Seaport Foundation's one-month period, during which apprentices are introduced to woodworking, Garcia successfully completed a three-phase curriculum lasting between six and nine months.



Courtesy Photo

"[The apprentices] work about 32 hours a week and earn \$14 an hour. They complete a four-month program where we're doing all kinds of training, woodworking, boat making, and on-the-water drills," said Todd Ruopp, Alexandria Seaport Foundation deputy director. They also learn "how to navigate and sail a boat to prepare them for different job opportunities."

At the end of the apprenticeship, Garcia, like the 24 other apprentices who complete the program annually, was offered job opportunities with local Alexandria businesses, including many in the construction industry.

"They go through three two-week externships. We pay them to go, learn, and work for an employer they expressed interest in. If they want to stay [with the first job], they can, and [they] don't have to try out other jobs," said Ruopp.

Garcia elected to complete his externship with Even Scale, a locally owned and operated home remodeling and interior design business.



Courtesy Photo

"When I started working with Seaport, I did my best not only to teach the skills that [apprentices] need to work for my company but also to mentor them," said Even Scale CEO Roberto Gomez.

"Many of these young men come from upbringings similar to mine. That included a lack of resources, a lot of trauma, and negativity surrounding you on all sides. For the most part, you're in a constant state of survival mode."

When Gomez met Garcia, they discussed their life experiences and shared mistakes.

"Anthony had that glimmer in his eye like he wanted to change for himself. He wanted to do better for himself," said Gomez. Seeing him asking questions and wanting better for himself was inspiring. I wanted to do everything I could to help him."

Since coming to work for Gomez, Garcia has learned how to hang doors and protect client property. He will learn proper painting techniques and plaster finishing drywall in the coming weeks.

At the end of the externship, the Alexandria Seaport Foundation will help Garcia secure a permanent job, possibly with Even Scale.

"We then check in at the six-month, one-year, and 18-month mark to see how they're doing," said Ruopp. "If they need support in some way at any time, we are here to help. We're very good at coordinating resources to support the apprentices."

Even Scale can train him thoroughly, with the Alexandria Seaport Foundation covering the apprentice's labor cost. When his training is complete, Gomez estimates that Garcia will be able to earn \$20 to \$22 an hour.