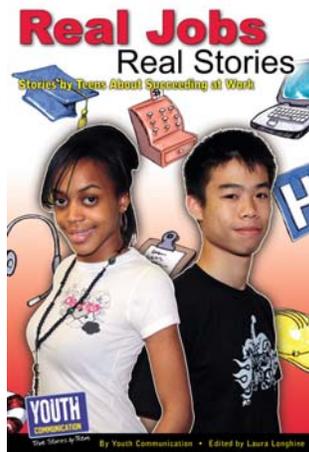

THE POWER OF NARRATIVE

**Changing the Trajectory of Teens' Lifepaths,
One Story at a Time**

An Outcome Evaluation of
Youth Communication and
Development Without Limits' Work Readiness
Curriculum Pilot-Tested with New York City's
Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP)



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As principal investigator and co-investigator, Dr. Ben-Avie has conducted numerous research studies, including studies of the implementation of Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative in Connecticut (U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice); Smaller Learning Communities in Connecticut (U.S. Department of Education), Connecticut's Early Childhood Educators Professional Development Initiative (U.S. Department of Education); and the implementation in an urban school district of (1) Motivational Enhancement Therapy/Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and (2) Functional Family Therapy (Health and Human Services' Center for Substance Abuse Treatment). As an Associate Research Scientist at the Yale School Development Program, he conducted national, large-scale assessment activities over the course of 10 years including the design of research studies, the design of assessment systems, data collection, and management, statistical analyses, and data interpretation workshops.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
The Pilot of the <i>Real Jobs, Real Stories</i> Curriculum	6
<i>Real Jobs</i> ' Theory of Change	7
Overview of Research Findings	8
Conclusion	15
Introduction to the Stories	15
Description and Analysis of the Stories	16

Tables

Work history, p. 9
Psychological state as it relates to educational outcomes, p. 10
Completion of summer reading for school, p. 10
“As a result of <i>Real Jobs</i> ...,” pp. 11, 12
Increased impact on potential first generation college students, p. 13
Increased impact on older youth, p. 14

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth Communication and Development Without Limits collaborated to produce a work readiness curriculum to be pilot-tested by young people participating in New York City's Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP). New York City contracts its SYEP jobs through nonprofit organizations. The nonprofits find placements for the youth and monitor the worksites. The nonprofits are also mandated to provide 17.5 hours of an educational component, focused mostly on preparing youth participants for the world of work. During summer 2009, the Children's Aid Society and the Police Athletic League implemented the curriculum designed by Youth Communication and Development Without Limits called *Real Jobs, Real Stories*. The most salient and unique feature of the *Real Jobs* curriculum is the use of teen-written stories from Youth Communication. In the stories, teens describe the challenges they faced in getting and keeping jobs, managing stress, dealing with money, and how they eventually succeeded due to perseverance and guidance.

The participants in this summer's *Real Jobs* program were surveyed twice, with 1,246 respondents in the first survey and 1,615 in the second. The demographic data collected suggest that the respondents stood much to gain from the kind of job training provided: 43% reported that they had never had a job prior to their participation in *Real Jobs*; 26% were above the typical age for high school students; and 26% of the sample, if they went to college would be the first person in their family to do so. There was solid evidence that this group needs intervention and support. In the educational arena, 49% of respondents said they cannot wait to finish high school and be done with school forever; 27% said they didn't need good grades to do what they want in life; 49% didn't do any summer reading at all (beyond *Real Jobs*); and 85% said that they are usually late. Thus, there was a good match between the needs of the youth and the *Real Jobs* intervention.

Overall, *Real Jobs* was effective for many of the participants; 55% of respondents agreed that *Real Jobs* taught them skills that no one else did, and 73% agreed that after their participation in *Real Jobs*, they now know the importance of furthering their education beyond high school.

Real Jobs also succeeded in stimulating voluntary reading, despite the fact that this was a group that reported doing little or no summer reading outside of the program. Three quarters of the participants read additional stories on their own, including 26% who read more than five additional stories, and another 5% who reported reading the entire anthology (more than 25 additional stories). Voluntary summer reading is one of the key strategies needed to stem summer learning loss, to which this group of youth is particularly vulnerable.

The use of stories written by the respondents' peers seemed to have had a profound effect on helping the respondents develop the kind of skills necessary for future success in the workplace. Respondents who agreed that the stories in the *Real Jobs* anthology showed them how to avoid getting into trouble on the job also agreed that as a result of *Real Jobs*, they now have the skill to deal with difficult people or annoying

customers, can communicate effectively with coworkers, and understand what it means to be professional. Furthermore, respondents who agreed that they learned skills in *Real Jobs* that no one else taught them also agreed that *Real Jobs* gave them ideas about what they can do next in life.

The *Real Jobs* program also promoted greater educational aspirations amongst the respondents. Those who, as a result of their participation in *Real Jobs*, developed a core group of workplace skills – specifically, dealing with annoying or difficult customers, communicating effectively with coworkers, and understanding what it means to be professional – also agreed that as a result of *Real Jobs*, they are more confident about applying to college. These data suggest that in addition to developing a set of core working skills, these respondents also developed greater educational aspirations.

This intervention was especially effective for the 26% of respondents who, if they attended college, would be the first person in their family to do so. These potential first-generation college students were significantly more likely than the other respondents in the sample to believe that they do not need good grades in high school to do what they want in life and to feel that they cannot wait to finish high school and be done with school forever. Following the *Real Jobs* intervention, however, these respondents scored significantly higher than their peers on items such as: “This summer I learned how important reading is to doing well in the workplace,” “Using the skills I learned in *Real Jobs*, I can communicate effectively with supervisors,” “As a result of *Real Jobs*, I know how to budget my money,” and “The stories in *Real Jobs* gave me ideas about what I can do next in my life.” These respondents were also significantly more likely to have read the biographical notes about the post-high school successes of the writers which appeared at the end of the stories in the *Real Jobs* anthology, and say that the notes gave them hope. These are particularly promising findings.

The intervention was also especially effective for 19-24-year-olds, who comprised 22% of the sample. This subpopulation was relatively distinct from the potential first-generation college students discussed above. These respondents scored significantly higher than young participants in the program on the item, “This summer, I learned how important reading is to succeeding in the workplace.” Indeed, they read significantly more in the *Real Jobs* anthology than just the assigned material. Moreover, these respondents displayed results significantly higher than those of their peers on the item, “The stories in *Real Jobs* gave me ideas about what I can do next in my life.” *Real Jobs* helped these respondents, in particular, to develop the skills necessary to succeed in their summer jobs, and taught them skills that no one else did.

The *Real Jobs* intervention was especially effective for potential first-generation college students and students above the typical high school age. It also appears to stimulate voluntary reading among young people for whom reading is not a habit. A majority of the youth reported that they learned skills in *Real Jobs* that they had not learned anywhere else. The study’s findings support the conclusion that when given opportunities to learn and to use these job readiness skills, and read substantive stories by peers, the youth gained a sense of empowerment and developed greater career and educational aspirations.

THE PILOT OF THE *REAL JOBS, REAL STORIES* CURRICULUM

Youth Communication and Development Without Limits collaborated to produce a work readiness curriculum to be pilot-tested by young people participating in New York City's Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP). New York City contracts its SYEP jobs through nonprofit organizations. The nonprofits find placements for the youth and monitor the worksites. The nonprofits are also mandated to provide 17.5 hours of an educational component, focused mostly on preparing youth participants for the world of work. During summer 2009, the Children's Aid Society and the Police Athletic League implemented the curriculum designed by Youth Communication and Development Without Limits called *Real Jobs, Real Stories*. The most salient and unique feature of the *Real Jobs* curriculum is the use of teen-written stories from Youth Communication. In the stories, teens describe the challenges they faced in getting and keeping jobs, managing stress, dealing with money, and how they eventually succeeded due to perseverance and guidance.

Youth Communication, founded in 1980, is a nonprofit youth development program located in New York City whose mission is to teach writing, journalism, and leadership skills, and to make youth voices heard as widely as possible. Each year, 100 public high school students write and illustrate Youth Communication's two award-winning teen magazines. The writers are a diverse group, including teens in foster care, recent immigrants, and low-income youth. Working with full-time professional editors, the writers may take several months to complete a single story. This process results in writing of uncommon depth and authenticity.

In addition to publishing magazines, Youth Communication has published more than 70 anthologies on topics teens consider most important, such as peer pressure, families, and improving their communities. Stories by teens at Youth Communication are also frequently reprinted in popular and professional magazines.

Development Without Limits is an educational consulting organization that supports youth development programs and schools by developing curricula, training staff and working directly with young people. Since it was founded in 2000, Development Without Limits has worked with hundreds of community-based organizations, after-school and summer programs, schools, and other educational institutions, and thousands of young people.

The mission of Development Without Limits is to provide dynamic and challenging learning experiences for young people and adults alike. The philosophy of Development Without Limits is based on the idea that people learn best and are most productive when they are interested and engaged in what they are doing, and when learning itself feels meaningful. For this kind of engagement to occur, activities need to be dynamic and based upon the skills, interests, and ideas of the participants. Development Without Limits approaches each project as something new, tailoring

programs, curricula, and staff development to meet the unique needs of each organization.

The *Real Jobs* curriculum is comprised of:

- Participant Workbook: Includes informational and interactive worksheets to accompany the activities in the Leader's Guide, including a resume guide and a college calendar. It includes opportunities for teens to write and reflect on their work experiences.
- Participant Anthology: Includes up to 24 teen-written stories about work and related topics: 7 required stories to accompany the activities in the Leader's Guide, and 17 supplementary stories. The stories are designed to provide teens with models for how to get and keep jobs. The teens are encouraged to read beyond the assigned readings.
- Leader's Guide: Includes contents of Participant Workbook, workshop plans, discussion questions, and workshop facilitation guidelines.

Professional development was provided to two cohorts of thirty staff members who facilitated the SYEP educational workshops with the youth. Professional development consisted of three sessions throughout the summer. In addition, Development Without Limits conducted technical assistance and observations of selected sites.

Real Jobs' Theory of Change

Youth are able to multiply their options as a result of developmental experiences, which are the building blocks of young people's competencies and future orientation. Future orientation is the ability to conceive of one's own development—and take actions in the here-and-now to achieve that future. Developmental experiences are characterized by (1) cognitive processing that leads to a sense of well-being that, in turn, promotes future interest (Comer, 1998) and (2) a reorientation of the self into a larger context. Even though the process may at first be painful, developmental experiences eventually produce a sense of psychological pleasure as the teen realizes that he or she can deal with conflict and/or handle the increased choices of how and what to think and feel and how to behave in such larger contexts as the workplace and higher education.

Learning activities provide the spark – or trigger – and the students' self-awareness provides the proof of whether an experience has been developmental: when teens think about and express what they derived from the activity and response (what they are now able to do with this new learning), then the activity can be considered one that promotes a developmental experience. Youth who are underprepared for the workplace, when exposed to narratives written by teens like them, will experience heightened interest and motivation to engage in learning activities. As a result of their engagement, youth increasingly take responsibility for their lifepaths.

An effective way of promoting relationships is by enticing youth to become involved in role-playing learning activities that are related to narratives written by peers. When healthy relationships form among the youth and between the youth and the educators, (1) youth provide support to one another; and (2) a shift occurs among the youth and they increasingly embrace the guidance of adults. Learning and developmental

outcomes include enhanced literacy, expanded options, and a keener self-awareness. More than this, they become more able to handle interpersonal conflicts. In this way, the teens learn to function in a diverse workplace, demonstrate professional conduct, meet workplace demands, and consider college as an option.

The Surveys

Real Jobs' theory of change informed the design and development of the two surveys. The surveys are an outgrowth of over 10 years of research at the Yale Child Study Center, and are based on the idea that youth who develop well, learn well. To the core surveys, Youth Communication and Development Without Limits added items based on their knowledge of the participating youth and the desired outcomes of the intervention. The first survey was primarily demographic in nature. The second survey was comprised of 29 items relating to the potential impact of *Real Jobs* on teens' successful transition to the world of work and educational aspirations, and met statisticians' criteria for reliability [$\alpha = .905$]. The surveys do not ask intrusive questions about health-related or family issues.

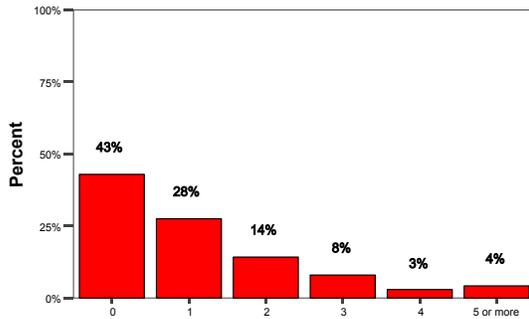
OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The participants in this summer's *Real Jobs* program were surveyed twice, with 1,246 respondents in the first survey and 1,615 in the second. The demographic data collected suggest that the respondents stood much to gain from the kind of job training provided:

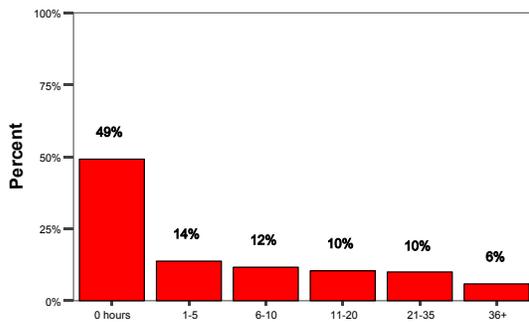
- 43% reported that they had never had a job prior to their participation in *Real Jobs*;
- 85% said that they are usually late;
- 26% were above the typical age for high school students; and 22% of the sample, if they went to college would be the first person in their family to do so;
- 49% of respondents said they cannot wait to finish high school and be done with school forever;
- 27% said they didn't need good grades to do what they want in life; and
- 49% didn't do any summer reading at all.

The following demographic items capture the teens' experiences with the world of work prior to the summer.

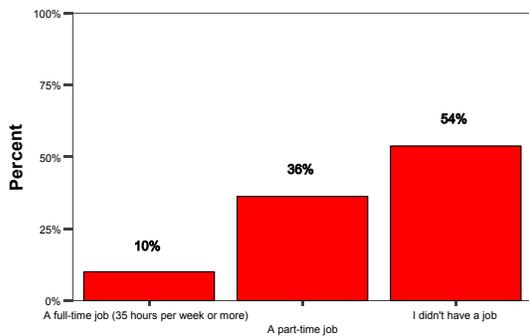
Before this summer, I had the following number of jobs:



During this past school year, I worked outside my home for the following number of hours each week:



Last summer, I had:

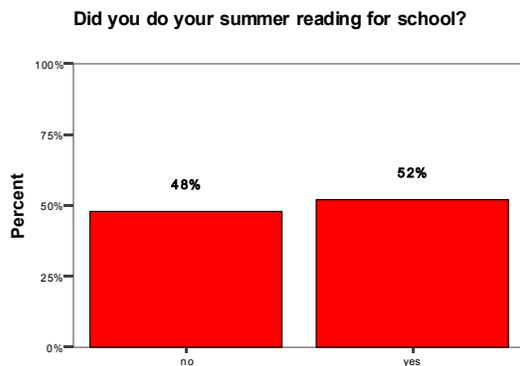


There was a good match between the needs of the youth and the *Real Jobs* intervention. The participants in the intervention were generally unfamiliar with the world of work and they were not learning the skill set essential for success in the workplace elsewhere. In terms of developing the qualities that employers tend to desire in new hires, many of the youth have not developed the necessary attitudes, skills, and knowledge. For example, the youth were asked to indicate the strength of their agreement

to a series of items that measure their psychological state as it relates to educational outcomes. One third indicated that they do not like being told what to do, which may negatively impact their relations with supervisors. Moreover, a quarter of the youth reported that when they are in a “bad situation,” they do not act in a resourceful and creative way that would enable them to solve their problems. It makes sense, therefore, that many of the youth indicated that they are not able to move from a state of anger to a more resourceful state within a short time period.

Psychological state as it relates to educational outcomes	Percent Agreeing or Strongly Agreeing
When I’m in a bad situation, I often feel like there’s nothing I can do about it.	27%
I don’t like to be told what to do.	36%
If another person makes me angry, I am able to put it aside after thinking about it for a short time.	58%

A desired quality among first-year college students and new hires is competence in reading and related literacy skills. In general, the youth were not avid readers. Of the respondents, only 19% strongly agreed that they like to read in their free time; another 32% agreed to this item. Other than *Real Jobs*, 66% indicated that they read other books over the summer. The nature of these books is not known. What is known is that half of the youth did not complete their summer reading for school.



Youth Communication offered the youth free books that are similar to the *Real Jobs* anthology. Forty teens ordered a free book. This fact begs the question, why did so few students take advantage of the offer? Does this indicate a satisfaction with the stories automatically supplied, or a lack of interest? Could more classroom hours change this outcome? [Note: It is also possible that the “free book request forms” were not adequately distributed, which was reported to be the case at some sites. The idea of offering teens free books, as a means to learn whether they want to read more stories by

peers and to induce additional voluntary reading, is an interesting one which is worth retesting under more controlled circumstances.] A remarkably weak correlation ($r = .155$) was found between how much the youth read (outside of *Real Jobs*) and the level of their interest in going to college. It would have been expected that the youth who are interested in going to college would read the most. This was not the case. An additional analysis revealed a similar pattern. A very weak association ($r = .126$) was found between the level of students' interest in going to college and their level of agreement that they learned over the summer how important reading is for doing well on the job. In general, youth who realize that they need more education to accomplish their personal goals typically tend to complete their summer reading for school at a higher rate than their peers. Thus, it was surprising that the respondents (1) who realized that they need more education and (2) who disagreed that they need more education did not differ in terms of their summer reading for school. A brief intervention cannot be expected to address this finding. But it is troubling nonetheless that students who are interested in going to college report doing as little reading as peers who do not expect to go to college.

The youth were asked to indicate how many stories in *Real Jobs* they read beyond the assigned ones. Three quarters of the youth read at least some stories beyond the assignments: 44% read between 1 and 5 more stories; 26% read 6-20 additional stories, and five percent read the entire book (33 stories). Although the teens were not avid readers, the stories that were included in *Real Jobs* enticed many teens to do voluntary reading. This promising finding is consistent with the prediction of the research team.

The youth did read the stories that were included in the *Real Jobs* anthology and the intervention was effective for many of them. For example, 80% agreed that, "As a result of *Real Jobs*, I now know how I should (and should not) act on a job." Moreover, 73% agreed that, "The stories in *Real Jobs* showed me how to avoid getting into trouble at my job."

<i>As a result of Real Jobs . . .</i>	Percent Agreeing or Strongly Agreeing
I learned skills in <i>Real Jobs</i> that no one else taught me.	55%
As a result of <i>Real Jobs</i> , I now have the skill to deal with difficult people or annoying customers.	64%
As a result of <i>Real Jobs</i> , I know how to budget my money.	64%
Using the skills that I learned in <i>Real Jobs</i> , I can communicate effectively with supervisors.	70%
As a result of <i>Real Jobs</i> , I know how to make a good first impression.	72%
As a result of <i>Real Jobs</i> , I'm more confident about applying to college.	72%

Using the skills that I learned in <i>Real Jobs</i> , I can communicate effectively with my co-workers.	72%
The stories in <i>Real Jobs</i> showed me how to avoid getting into trouble at my job.	73%
As a result of <i>Real Jobs</i> , I understand what it means to be “professional” on the job.	75%
As a result of <i>Real Jobs</i> , I now know the importance of getting more education after high school.	76%
<i>Real Jobs</i> helped me to develop the skills I need for succeeding in my summer job.	76%
As a result of <i>Real Jobs</i> , I understand what’s expected in the workplace.	78%
As a result of <i>Real Jobs</i> , I now know how I should (and should not) act on a job.	80%

The use of stories written by the respondents’ peers seemed to have had a profound effect on helping the respondents to develop the kind of skills necessary for future workplace success. This statement is based on an analysis (Pearson Product Moment Correlation) that discerned solid correlations between the responses of the students to “The stories in *Real Jobs* showed me how to avoid getting into trouble at my job” and their responses on the following items. This means that if they tended to agree to the first statement, they also tended to agree with the items below. The reverse is also true: if they tended to disagree with the first statement, they also tended to disagree with these items.

- As a result of *Real Jobs*, I now have the skill to deal with difficult people or annoying customers ($r = .503$).
- Using the skills that I learned in *Real Jobs*, I can communicate effectively with my co-workers ($r = .536$).
- As a result of *Real Jobs*, I understand what it means to be “professional” on the job ($r = .514$).

The *Real Jobs* intervention also promoted greater educational aspirations amongst the respondents. The respondents who, as a result of their participation in *Real Jobs*, developed a core group of workplace skills—dealing with annoying or difficult customers, communicating effectively with coworkers, and understanding what it means to be professional—also agreed that as a result of *Real Jobs*, they are more confident about applying to college (correlations of .534, .525, and .524 respectively). It appears that in addition to developing a set of core working skills, these respondents also developed greater educational aspirations. Furthermore, respondents who agreed that they learned skills in *Real Jobs* that no one else taught them also agreed that *Real Jobs* gave them ideas about what they can do next in life ($r = .597$).

First-Generation College Students

For the quarter of the respondents (n=374, 26%) who, if they attended college, would be the first person in their family to do so, the *Real Jobs* intervention was especially effective. Overall, the potential first generation college students were initially much more likely than their peers to believe that they do not need good grades in high school to do what they want in life (M = 2.92 and M = 2.12, $t(1410) = -9.00, p < .001$) and that they cannot wait to finish high school and be done with school forever (M = 3.66 and M = 3.15, $t(1392) = -6.44, p < .001$). However, the *Real Jobs* program seemed to have a very positive effect on these individuals; they scored significantly higher than their peers—and the difference was not due to chance—on the following items.

Items for which potential first generation college students reported significantly greater impact than their peers
This summer, I learned how important reading is to doing well in the workplace.
Using the skills that I learned in <i>Real Jobs</i> , I can communicate effectively with supervisors.
As a result of <i>Real Jobs</i> , I know how to budget my money.
The stories in <i>Real Jobs</i> gave me ideas about what I can do next in my life.

The potential first-generation college students were also significantly more likely to have read the notes at the end of the stories in the *Real Jobs* anthology, and say that they gave them hope (M = 3.73 and M = 3.38, $t(1144) = -4.85, p < .001$). These are particularly promising findings, as these youth are among the most likely not to pursue a college education.

Before their participation in *Real Jobs*, these students were significantly more likely than their peers to devalue high school grades and to look forward to finishing high school and being done with school forever. As a direct result of the *Real Jobs* intervention, these same students came to recognize the importance of reading, learned to communicate effectively with supervisors and to manage their money, and most importantly, developed ideas about what they could do next in their lives.

Students Above Typical High School Age

About a quarter of the students (22.3%) were above the typical age of high school students. An analysis determined that this subpopulation was relatively distinct from the potential first-generation college students discussed above. These respondents, as opposed to their high school-aged peers, scored significantly higher on items such as: “This summer, I learned how important reading is for doing well on the job” (M = 4.15 and M = 3.77, $t(1402) = -6.12, p < .001$), and, indeed, they read significantly more in the *Real Jobs* anthology than what was assigned (M = 3.61 and M = 2.18, $t(1424) = -12.64, p < .001$). Moreover, *Real Jobs* helped this subpopulation of students far more than the high school-age students to develop the skills necessary to succeed in their summer jobs, and the difference was not due to chance.

Much more than their younger peers, these students now understand the importance of reading, and learned skills that will help them in the workplace. They also developed ideas about what to do next in their lives, and wrote resumes that they feel comfortable giving to employers. And significantly, these students agreed that they learned skills in *Real Jobs* that no one else had taught them.

Similar to potential first-generation college students discussed above, *Real Jobs* was especially effective for older participants, supporting the conclusion that when students are in a high school environment where they are not taught useful skills and important qualities for gainful employment, they may become dejected and unmotivated. However, when they are given opportunities to learn and use these skills, they gain a sense of empowerment and develop greater career and educational aspirations.

Items for which 19-24-year olds reported significantly greater impact than their younger peers
I learned skills in <i>Real Jobs</i> that no one else taught me.
<i>Real Jobs</i> helped me to develop the skills I need for succeeding in my summer job.
Using the skills that I learned in <i>Real Jobs</i> , I can communicate effectively with supervisors.
As a result of <i>Real Jobs</i> , I know how to budget my money.
I now have a written resume that I feel comfortable giving to a future employer.
The stories in <i>Real Jobs</i> gave me ideas about what I can do next in my life.

Program Implementation

The intervention was implemented in two places: Children’s Aid Society and the Police Athletic League. CAS served 675 youth and PAL served 1,550 youth. The scores of the youth in these groups were compared. On two key indicators of engagement in academic learning the youth at PAL had higher scores that were not due to chance—the higher the scores on these items, however, the more negative the level of engagement: (1) “I do not need to get good grades in high school to do what I want in life;” and (2) “I can’t wait to finish high school and be done with school forever.” Consider that the youth at PAL had a mean score of 3.29 on the latter item in contrast to the mean score of 2.74 observed among the youth at CAS. In general, the more that youth are disengaged from the learning process in high school, they less likely they are to actively participate in an intervention that underscores the importance of academic learning (e.g., reading) and further education after high school. It is worthwhile to note that the research did not include an implementation study that would have provided solid data on the nature and quality of *Real Jobs* implementation in these two settings. Clearly, future research in this area is warranted.

Conclusion

As indicated by the research findings, the pilot program of *Real Jobs* accomplished a great deal. Significant percentages of respondents learned skills that are crucial to succeeding in the workplace and to managing their money. Just as many gained an understanding of the importance of furthering their education beyond high school and feel more confident about applying to college. Most telling, a majority of respondents say that they “learned skills in *Real Jobs* that no one else taught me.” These facts alone justify increased funding and promotion of *Real Jobs*.

Even more encouraging, though, is that analysis of the data illuminates the particular successes of *Real Jobs*, and will thus allow adjustments to be made that will lead to even greater degrees of achievement in future years. Specifically, two groups emerged from the data as having been affected in especially positive ways by the program. The first group consists of students who, if they attend college, will be the first member of their family to do so; the second consists of youth ages 19 to 24. The ways in which *Real Jobs* affected these two groups are explored in detail above.

Clearly, *Real Jobs* provides an effective response to the needs of the enrolled young people, just 25% of whom receive advice about working from family members, and 27% of whom receive that kind of guidance from a teacher, social worker, guidance counselor, or after school staff member. Because it has proven particularly effective among the two groups discussed above – potential first generation college students and youth ages 19–24 – we recommend that the program focus its energies on these groups, which an analysis shows are relatively distinct from one another. *Real Jobs* instructors should also be advised about trends that emerged from the pre-training survey so that they may direct their attentions toward those issues.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STORIES

One finds a number of recurring themes in the *Real Jobs* anthology that align with the impact that youth report as a result of reading the stories. Sometimes the authors illustrate the themes through their actions, or by reflection upon their actions. Other times they are evident as a result of an author’s inaction or failure to recognize their importance even after the fact.

Foremost among these themes is that of *persistence*, or *perseverance*. Everyone encounters challenges – in the workplace and in their personal lives – and an important determinant of a person’s success is his or her resolve to confront those challenges and keep going. Josbeth Lebron demonstrates this fact in her story, entitled “Growing Up on the Job.” Josbeth struggled to find employment for quite a while, and neither of her first two permanent jobs lasted very long. Nevertheless, Josbeth maintained her commitment to being employed, and eventually found a good fit. By contrast, in “You’re Fired,” Christine McKenna became so scared of employment after several bad experiences that

she gave up trying. Christine's experience, precisely because of its unhappy ending, shows the consequences of giving up.

Another concept which pervades the *Real Jobs* stories is that there is *no failure, only feedback*. Related – but not identical – to the theme of persistence, this means, quite literally, that there is no such thing as failure. Jordan Temple, in “Community College: A Second Chance,” learned this when he was forced to attend a community college. He saw this as a failure, but it turned out to be an extremely valuable experience for him. Troy Welcome, in “My First Semester: Overworked, Underpaid, and Unprepared,” seemed to believe in this idea all along, as he refused to consider his two major setbacks to his goal of obtaining a college degree to constitute failure; instead, he continued to relentlessly pursue his goal.

The importance of a positive *response to criticism* and a healthy understanding of, and respect for *authority* appear a number of times in the *Real Jobs* stories. In “Quiet on the Job,” Danielle Wilson expresses her dismay that her teachers and bosses have repeatedly misjudged her character by commenting on her reserved demeanor. Instead of attempting to adapt, she became defensive at the suggestion. By contrast, in “Welcome to Adulthood,” Ilya Arbit learned to appreciate his superiors when he was temporarily thrust into their role.

The potential impact that *guidance* can have on the life of a young person is also a salient concept in many of the stories. In “I Keep my Bling in the Bank,” Jarel Melendez had never been exposed to the benefits of banking until a supervisor at his summer job took him to set up a savings account. In “A Designer Addiction,” Delia Cleveland credits her mother with forcing her to confront her unhealthy obsession with her appearance. And Robin Chan, in “Karate Killed the Monster Inside Me,” completely transformed his attitude toward the “menacing” people in the world because of the example set by his karate instructor, Mr. Sloan.

At the foundation of all the success stories in *Real Jobs* – and missing from all those which conclude with unresolved feedback (not failure) – is the concept of *personal efficacy*. Many authors begin their stories with a sense that they have very little control over their lives. Most, though not all, learn that they have the ability to take control. This is illustrated very effectively by Xavier Reyes in “There's always a Choice.” Xavier discusses his feeling, while in foster care, that he could not make choices for himself. His experience demonstrated to him – and to his readers – that this is not the case.

In our estimation, some stories in the *Real Jobs* anthology are more effective than others. A story can be effective not only by demonstrating positive behavior, but also by showing the destructive outcomes of certain attitudes and actions. Among those that fall in the former category is Jarel Melendez's “Taking it to the Top.” Jarel, at his story's beginning, thought himself unable to solve a serious problem he confronted at work. When someone else took the first step toward confronting the issue, however, Jarel took the bull by the horns. By the end, he learned that being proactive leads to positive outcomes.

Among those stories that teach by describing mistakes, in addition to the aforementioned “You're Fired,” is Xavier Reyes' “Maxed Out.” Xavier, without understanding what he was doing, incurred a huge amount of credit card debt, which he

was still paying five years after he began spending. His struggles to deal with the consequences of his actions constitute a warning against carelessness when it comes to money.

Some stories, though, seem less valuable as part of the *Real Jobs* anthology. Foremost among these is “Young and Hungry,” in which Joseph Alvarez, a 25-year-old college graduate, struggles with unemployment. Although Joseph’s experience is instructive in certain ways, he is in a life stage that is extremely different than those of any participants in the Summer Youth Employment Program. In addition, he openly doubts the value of a college degree, which, while understandable in his predicament, sends a dangerous message. Another story that seems not to warrant inclusion in the anthology is Kanwal Javid’s “Out into the World.” Simply put, Kanwal’s story lacks significant description of her duties on the job, and provides very little analysis of her experience and what it taught her.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF THE STORIES

Rush Hour at Macy’s

In “Rush Hour at Macy’s,” Sharif Berkeley talks about the challenges he faced on his first day working at Macy’s. Initially assigned to the electronics department – the area of his expertise – he was switched to the housewares department at the last minute. It was right by the clearance section around 5 o’clock that Sharif began to have problems behind the checkout counter. The first customer had three items that scanned incorrectly, and in the time it took to call a manager for assistance and resolve the issue, the line had grown. But before he could even move on from the first customer, Sharif encountered another problem: his check reader wasn’t working.

By this time the customers in line were becoming visibly annoyed. A cashier came over to help Sharif with the problem, but it had already caused such a delay that the manager felt compelled to give the customers free coffee mugs just to pacify them. At this point, a neighboring cashier explained to the waiting customers that it was Sharif’s first day on the job, and that he was nervous. Immediately, the customers changed their expressions. Some even told him that they could relate and that he shouldn’t feel bad.

The main strength of this story is in its use of a specific, relatable experience to illustrate a lesson. It is easy to imagine oneself in a similar situation, so it is not difficult to internalize the lesson which Sharif learned. Sharif’s experience also highlights several important themes. Foremost among these is *communication*. He discovered that the same customers who, a moment earlier, had been muttering about him under their breath, expressed empathy once they were explained his situation. Also very important is *perseverance*. On his first day, Sharif was inexperienced, confused, and nervous. But once he realized that it wasn’t supposed to be easy right away, he embraced the challenge and put himself to work. Over time, and through sustained effort, Sharif became an excellent worker. Lastly, Sharif himself points out the importance of *confidence*. Rather

than becoming discouraged by the early bump in the road, Sharif continued to believe in his abilities, and eventually fulfilled them.

Welcome to Adulthood

In “Welcome to Adulthood,” Ilya Arbit relates his experience as a counselor-in-training for a group of 12 boys aged 6 and 7. Ilya enjoyed his newfound position of responsibility, and envied the counselors’ authority (and their hand-held radios). Soon Ilya’s confidence and eagerness to take on further responsibility was put to the test – his senior counselor called in sick, leaving Ilya to supervise and entertain his group for the entire day. Almost immediately, Ilya recalls, he realized how tough the day was going to be. He struggled to keep their attention and to engage them in group activities. Things got worse when, during the sports period, a child fell and scraped his knee. Controlling his panic as best he could, Ilya tried to console the injured kid. Not knowing what to do, he grabbed the hand-held radio and called the camp office. Humbled and nervous, Ilya waited with the crying child for help to arrive.

Ilya’s experience provides a potent illustration of the importance of *humility* and *respect for authority*. His initial infatuation with his status and desire for further responsibility caused him to be blindsided by the realities of the job he was required to perform. As he concludes, “I had a lot more respect for my coworker who performed these duties every day... Now I wanted to earn my authority properly – with age and experience, not an early promotion.” Respect for authority does not just entail deference, as Ilya learned. It includes an appreciation and respect for the job being done by one’s superiors, and an understanding that it takes time and effort to reach their level.

My Success at Job Success

In “My Success at Job Success,” Juan Diaz relates an anecdote about his experience in Job Success classes. His instructor, Charles, insisted that he remove his earring – a demand that he was initially loath to meet, as he thought he was being singled out. Once he noticed that other students were also required to adjust their appearance in certain ways, however, Juan submitted. He concluded that Charles was serious about the dress code and determined to successfully complete the program “if it was the last thing I did.”

As Juan narrates, his joking style quickly establishes a rapport with his teen audience. The off-color nature of the “Big Juan” nametag incident reminds the reader that they are discussing the experiences of people not too different from themselves. And despite his wisecracking, Juan manages to convey the satisfaction he felt upon completion of the “Job Success” program. On the other hand, though, Juan seems to feel that Charles possesses authority in the classroom only insofar as Juan himself deems it acceptable and fair. This approach somewhat detracts from the story’s utility as a positive example. It is still a useful background, however, for the discussion of concepts like *persistence* and *authority*.

More Money, More Problems, at Modell’s

Beginning his freshman year in high school Jose worked several jobs, including as a Community Health Advisor to local youth. During his sophomore year, however, he decided that it was time to look for a more permanent and better-paying job in order to

save for more expensive purchases, such as a computer for college. It took some time for Jose to find an opportunity, but it finally came at the beginning of his senior year when his friend Laura, who was resigning from her position at Modell's, told him to come down to the store. He was hired and assigned to the footwear section, which came as a surprise – Jose assumed he would be replacing Laura as a cashier. He was nervous, and his first day was busy, but it passed without a hitch.

Jose's experience at Modell's, however, wasn't completely positive. His relationship with several of his supervisors, particularly a manager named Mike, was tense. Mike bossed him around and made cracks about him being lazy. Jose didn't complain about Mike because he didn't think it would accomplish anything, but it was wearing on him and causing him to feel stressed about the job. Soon afterwards, Jose's hours were cut, meaning he wouldn't be able to earn the money he expected. Jose considered the situation, and decided to take an internship at Youth Communication and quit his job.

Early in his story, Jose displays a level of maturity when he aspires toward *financial independence*. His parents did support him, and he had enough money saved for most of his purposes, but once he determines that there are more substantial items he hopes to buy, he recognizes the need to begin saving. This kind of advance financial planning is an extremely important life skill. Jose displays similar maturity with regards to his future when faced with a *crossroad decision* – whether to continue his job at Modell's, despite his problems with Mike and his reduced hours, or to quit his job and focus on his internship. He is not afraid to adjust his priorities to fit reality, and is certain to benefit in the long run from his decision. As Jose himself acknowledges, however, he did not do everything right. He caused himself unnecessary problems through ineffective *conflict resolution* and a lack of *personal efficacy*. He chose not to take action to reduce his problem and thus allowed Mike to affect his job satisfaction, if not his performance. A *Real Jobs* instructor might ask: what could Jose have done to deal with his problems with Mike? Was quitting his job the right decision? If so, was there a way he could have allowed the decision to be pragmatic, rather than personal?

Quiet on the Job

In “Quiet on the Job,” Danielle talks about her sense of having two selves – a home self, which is comfortable and talkative – and a work or school self, which is quiet and reserved. She feels misunderstood by her bosses and teachers, who don't know her “true self.” Her explanation for her reserved behavior is that she becomes “...At-School-or-Work-Danielle who just goes to work or school to do what she's gotta do and be out.”

Danielle recognizes the drawbacks to her attitude. She relates an incident when she was asked to lure customers into the store with free samples, but was too shy to say anything more than “Free samples!” As a result, she gave away a lot of samples and brought very little business to the store. And while she does conclude by stating that she hopes to become more comfortable around authority figures, Danielle seems somewhat resigned to her predicament. “What they say doesn't matter and only God can judge me,” she says. Danielle's sensitivity to how she is perceived by others caused her to overlook an important factor in achieving success in the workplace – that one's personality can be made an asset in professional settings. In Danielle's case, had she brought her enthusiasm

and strong interpersonal skills to work with her, rather than going to “do what she’s gotta do and be out,” she would have made a better impression on her superiors. And more importantly, had she brought her full attention and ability to work with her, she could have expected to perform her job at a higher level.

The main problem with Danielle’s approach, though, is not that she is reserved. Rather, it is in her *response to criticism* directed toward her. Instead of resolving to work her attitude and demeanor after her bosses commented on how quiet she is, Danielle becomes upset that they fail to recognize her “true self.” She focuses on her own frustration rather than making an effort to determine the source and purpose of her boss’ criticism. Danielle, in this way, seems to think herself unable to respond to her difficulties, and thus fails to convey a sense of *personal efficacy*. In fact, her attitude toward her situation is so obviously counterproductive, in certain ways, that it is sure to spark discussion about what kinds of responses might have been better.

Taking it to the Top

In “Taking it to the Top” Jarel, at the time a high school student, was doing such a good job working full time at H&M that departments other than his own would often request that he come in to help them on his days off. At some point, though, someone began to “trash” the sections of the store where he was working. Jarel got sick of putting up with the inconvenience and decided to quit his job. This surprised everyone who knew him, and the human resources department tried to learn what drove Jarel to quit. When they were unable to help, Jarel resolved to go to the corporate office with his problem. He did not expect much assistance so high up the ladder, but to his surprise, the corporate official he approached was very interested in his problem. He informed Jarel that he was entitled to view the security tapes from his section, and when he did, he saw a manager of the store trashing the department. Many people had already complained about this manager, and she lost her job immediately. Jarel kept his job and had been promoted by the time he wrote his story.

Jarel’s story deals with issues like *conflict resolution* and *authority*. His instinct – a common one in these stories – was not to approach someone who could help him with his problem, but to try to ignore it. Eventually, the frustration became too great for him to handle. Jarel learned that approaching a superior in a calm, mature fashion would not reflect poorly on him and could even lead to a relationship with an influential person in the organization. This last point is important, as many *Real Jobs* stories convey a strong sense of distance and discomfort between the authors and their bosses. Jarel’s experience is instructive in that it shows the benefits to forging professional relationships as well as to taking an active stance in resolving one’s issues. As he learned, a person is never alone with his problems unless he chooses to be.

You’re Fired

In “You’re Fired,” Christine, a graduate of the Los Angeles foster care program, discusses the factors that have caused her to lose several jobs. Her first job was as a secretary at a law firm, which she worked while she attended college in the evenings. She then decided to take a weekend job to supplement her income. Not surprisingly, working 60 hours a week while going to school at night caught up with her quickly, and when the stress hospitalized her she was forced to give up both jobs. Christine’s next job was as an

administrative assistant at a non-profit organization, which she really enjoyed, especially because of her cordial relationship with her two bosses. She got too comfortable, however, and made a habit of discussing inappropriate subjects with them, which in time cost her the job. Christine's lost her next job too, this time for a simple mistake which she speculates was the just excuse her boss was looking for to fire her. Her next – and most recent – job, too, ended badly. Christine, once again, overworked herself to the point of exhaustion, and when it finally caught up with her, she was fired.

Christine's is a story of the hazards of both extremes – too much intensity and too much casualness. In this way, it is instructive. She provides an important reminder that even in a culture which idealizes hard work, there is such a thing as working too hard. By contrast, her experience also illustrates the danger of becoming too comfortable at work and forgetting the expectation of professional conduct. Christine's story leaves important questions unanswered. "Where is the middle ground" between doing too much and doing too little, she asks? The immediacy of her question begs an answer from the reader.

Christine's experience, in part, is a guide in how *not* to approach a job. Unlike a number of other stories, "You're Fired" fails to display a commitment to *persistence* in the face of workplace challenges. She seems not to realize that nobody gets everything right the first time, and some struggle for quite a while. Without a willingness to keep trying and a desire to learn and to improve, though, success is impossible. Instead, Christine shows an apparent feeling of helplessness. "It sounds so easy, doesn't it?" she asks about finding the elusive middle ground. "If only it were." Christine's struggle to find a middle ground is not unique to her, and her frustrated conclusion, while uninspiring, is ripe for evaluation.

Work it Out at Work

"Work it Out at Work" is an interview with June Deutsch, director of human resources at *Project Hospitality* in New York City. *Project Hospitality* is a non-profit organization based in Staten Island which provides services for hungry and homeless people, especially those living with HIV, substance abuse, and/or mental illness. Deutsch answers questions related to the stories in *Real Jobs*, and touches on several important fine points of workplace etiquette. After laying out several basic rules for workplace behavior, Deutsch emphasizes the fact that each workplace has a different culture and that what behavior is appropriate may vary. She also states several times that when faced with a problem with a co-worker or with some aspect of the job, it is certainly acceptable – in fact, it is preferable – to privately approach a boss or the co-worker involved in a respectful, constructive way. Had *Real Jobs* authors like Jose from "More Money, More Problems at Modell's" and Jarel from "Taking it to the Top" received such advice, they wouldn't have felt so unsure about seeking assistance from their bosses. This rule – that one should feel comfortable respectfully approaching a boss to discuss a problem – extends, Deutsch says, even to personal issues. There is no guarantee that it will produce the desired result, but it cannot hurt to try. In fact, she points out, asking questions can even lead to a closer relationship between the employer and employee – another lesson illustrated by Jarel in "Taking it to the Top."

Karate Killed the Monster Inside Me

Robin Chan was fed up. A member of the only Asian family living in a white neighborhood, he had spent years getting pushed around by bigger kids on his way home from school. As a result, he says, the “hate monster” grew inside him. He had no outlet, and the frustration grew. When he was about 9, Robin decided to learn karate so he could defend himself and even exact revenge upon his tormenters. His parents supported the endeavor, and soon he enrolled at a local studio. The first class was a challenge, and Robin immediately considered quitting. By the end of the second lesson, though, Mr. Sloan, the instructor, had taught some techniques for self defense that piqued Robin’s interest, and his enthusiasm was renewed. As time went on, Robin only became more passionate about karate.

Mr. Sloan also taught the class meditation. When he felt frustrated, Robin learned, he should close his eyes and visualize defeating the problem. After this, Mr. Sloan said, he would feel calmer and more determined to overcome the obstacle. Mr. Sloan also taught the class that karate was not a tool for hurting people or getting revenge. Rather, it was a means to become a role model – someone with a “good conscience, good morals, self-respect and respect for others.” This concept resonated with Robin, and he aspired to achieve the goals Mr. Sloan articulated. Robin soon had a chance to put what he learned into practice when two bullies began pushing him around as he walked home from school. Understandably, Robin became very aggravated. But he remembered the things Mr. Sloan had said and refused to fight back. He kept his cool and walked away, and the bullies bored of trying and went on their way. In addition to gaining the strength to take the high road, Robin also found himself becoming a role model for friends. He was working harder in school and his grades improved. Friends commented on the change, and some were even inspired to follow his lead.

Robin’s observed that there are many “menacing and evil people in this world.” Indeed, it is his desire to fight back against these people that drove him to learn karate in the first place. But it is not this reactionary form of problem solving that is most instructive about Robin’s experience. Rather, it is the change in his attitude – not his abilities – which most transforms him. “I no longer saw the martial arts as a way to get back at people who hurt me,” Robin said. “I knew from experience that there were enough menacing and evil people in this world. I didn’t want to become one of them.” Robin shows us that one doesn’t necessarily need to modify his or her perception of the outside world in order to grow. For Robin, the change was internal – he became more self-confident and secure, and it no longer mattered what other people thought or did. As a result of his experiences, Robin might advise youth struggling to overcome adversity not to let people or things which are out of your control affect what you can accomplish. On the other hand, the factor which seems to have most directly caused Robin’s change of attitude was the presence of Mr. Sloan as a *role model*. Robin was inspired by Mr. Sloan’s behavior and by his teachings, and aspired to become a role model himself.

A Designer Addiction

The “Managing Money” section of the *Real Jobs* stories starts with a bang. “My name is Dee, and I am a recovering junkie,” writes Delia Cleveland. Her addiction, interestingly enough, was not drugs, but designer clothing. It began when she was working a part-time job which, despite its modest pay, was enough to fuel her obsession. Dee, at the time an image-conscious 15 year old, loved what designer clothing did for her

social status: “Ralph [Lauren] offered me clout. The fellows adored me; the females were jealous. I became a fiend for the attention.” Even her furious mother could not force her to adjust her priorities. Until, that is, she began running out of money, and was forced to borrow from her mother. Eventually, the nagging began to get to her, and she resolved to show her mother that she was in control of her decisions and her money. Dee makes clear that her decision to stop (or reduce) her buying was “just to prove [her] mother wrong.” It came as a surprise, then, that as she observed the lifestyles of other designer addicts she found herself singularly unimpressed. There was the guy in \$100 jeans who refused to pay a train fare; the high school jock who continued to steal designer clothing even after getting caught doing it. Dee began to see that an addiction to designer clothing was symptomatic of a larger problem – a skewed sense of priorities. “Armed with this new knowledge,” she says, “I vowed to leave brand names alone.” She rewarded herself by spending the excess money on activities such as Broadway shows and art museums.

Though her tone is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, Dee is careful to emphasize the severity of her problem – she goes so far as to compare her obsession with designer clothing to drug addiction multiple times. Her experience also draws attention to an issue common to many young people - the incorporation of social success into a larger priority system. Dee spent her “last dollar to be able to wear Ralph’s emblem on my chest like a badge of honor and respect.” It is understandable that she valued the respect of her peers, but as she later discovered, her ideas about how to achieve that respect were in need of modification. This metaphor – “like a badge of honor and respect” – had become so powerful to her that it threatened to dominate her life.

Dee’s story also highlights the importance of *guidance* for young people, especially in regard to employment and finances. As she says, “one outrageous receipt and an angry mother saved me from a life of make-believe self-importance.” Who knows how long her addiction would have lasted and how far it would have gone if not for the pressure applied by her mother?

I Keep My Bling in the Bank

In “I Keep My Bling in the Bank” Jarel explains how learning to use a bank caused him to “deal with [his] money much differently.” He had a summer job and on the first payday his supervisor asked him if he had a savings account. Jarel laughed at the suggestion. “I had never been in a bank,” he writes, “or known anyone in my family to use one.” The concept was totally alien to him; he thought “only rich people used banks.” His supervisor took him to a bank to set up a savings account. Jarel was a little nervous and had a lot of questions about the idea of using a bank, but his concerns were put to rest after the teller cashed his check and a manager explained to him the benefits of setting up a savings account. The bank, he was told, pays interest on the money you save, so he would actually make money in addition to what he would save by avoiding the fee at a check cashing place. He also learned how to use an ATM card, which would give him direct access to his account from any ATM machine. Later, he opened a checking account which allowed him the convenience of being able to write checks to people. The next time Jarel got a job, he arranged to have his paycheck placed directly into his checking account using a system called “direct deposit.” Jarel also learned about the importance of building credit which will be very useful to him when he makes substantial investments in the future, such as in the house he hopes to one day build.

As Jarel indicated, his background did not expose him to the benefits of using a bank to save money. He is certainly not alone in this regard; there are numerous reasons why some people, particularly those of low socio-economic status, would not have a bank account. Jarel's world was one in which "only rich people used banks," a myth that his supervisor helped him to debunk. Significantly, since he arranged to have his money deposited directly into his bank account, he no longer spends it on things he doesn't need, like "clothes, shoes and DVDs." Banking caused Jarel's approach to money to change completely.

Like so many stories, Jarel's illustrates how important it is for young people to have *guidance*. If not for his supervisor's initiative, Jarel would have continued paying check cashing fees and spending his money carelessly. His story also conveys the extremely important message that there are resources available – financial and otherwise – to those who seek them out.

Maxed Out

Xavier Reyes first ran into debt problems when he was a 17 year old freshman in college. Bombarded with credit card applications, he applied to three, all of which were approved. As soon as the cards arrived, Xavier went on a shopping spree – lots of Adidas apparel, CDs, a radio, video games. "It was amazing," Xavier says. "I didn't have to have the money to buy these things, but whatever I wanted was mine." Even when the bills arrived he didn't realize the trouble he was in, thinking he could pay just the \$25 monthly minimum and suffer no consequences. Of course, the interest began to build and Xavier slipped further into debt. After a while, he lost hope and stopped paying his bills at all. He began receiving letters informing him about the consequences to his credit rating, but still had no solution. Finally, Xavier found a debt management agency which could negotiate lower interest rates, which would ease the burden and stop the letters. When Xavier wrote his story – 5 years into his debt – he still owed \$1000; paying it every month left him with barely \$50 to himself.

"Maxed Out," a warning about the hazards of uninformed and irresponsible credit card use, is an appropriate follow-up to the benefits of banking described in "I Keep My Bling in the Bank." Together, the two provide a primer about the advantages and disadvantages of "virtual money." Jarel was looser with his wallet before he learned about banking. Opening a savings account changed how he managed his money by making him more frugal. In contrast, Xavier initially thought having a credit card meant that "whatever [he] wanted was [his]," whether or not he could pay for it. Years into his debt, he had grown to "see them as a trap."

Xavier's experience emphasizes the importance of *reading the instruction manual*, so to speak. His failure to do so is what got him ensnared in the "trap" to begin with, and it was only when he did that he was able to begin to solve his problem. Xavier imagined that a credit card was a kind of free pass, and his carelessness cost him a great deal of money, not to mention time, energy, and sleep. But reading and following the instruction manual – seeking out and acting on the information – is what ultimately provided his solution.

My First Semester – Overworked, Underpaid, & Unprepared

As a youngster, Troy Welcome imagined that he would have an easy time “merging onto the highway of adult life.” A year after graduating from high school, however, he found that “the world of responsibilities, bills, priorities, and decisions is harder” than he thought. His first challenge came in the form of a rejection letter. Troy wanted to attend college in a rural environment, and hoped to study writing. These two criteria drew him to Sarah Lawrence College, and after a visit to the campus Troy had his heart set on spending the next four years there. Much to his dismay, though, he wasn’t accepted – a possibility he hadn’t anticipated. Because he didn’t finish filling out his SUNY applications, Troy was left with few options, one of which was to attend a CUNY school. His guidance counselor had good things to say about CUNY-Baruch, and Troy made that his first choice. He was excited when he was accepted; Troy was to be only the second person in his family to attend college.

However, things did not go smoothly once Troy arrived at Baruch. Registration was chaos – the wait for Troy’s appointment was extremely long, and he found that most of the classes he had planned to take were full. Troy finalized his schedule, but he was already struggling to attend class just three weeks into the semester. Working a full-time job at night compounded his difficulties, which didn’t last very long as he dropped out of school after just three months. It was only after leaving, Troy writes, that he realized why he had so much trouble at Baruch. He never envisioned himself attending school amid the hustle and bustle of the city, and so failing out of school was, in a sense, his way of rebelling. He continued to work full time, but his routine, and the fact that he was no longer in school, made him feel like he was “wasting [his] pitiful life away.” Finally, Troy came to the conclusion that he could not achieve what he hoped to without a college degree, and resolved to return to school. The story concludes with Troy trying to enroll in a SUNY school, where he hopes to immerse himself in the culture, “to eat, sleep, and breathe college.” This, he feels, will be his key to success.

Troy presents a very useful metaphor in the introduction to his story. That is, “merging onto the highway of adult life.” He did not appreciate the challenge of accepting full, adult responsibility for himself, and was thus unprepared to fully meet it. Troy merged too quickly and carelessly and found that the hazards of the highway were more than he was prepared to handle at that speed. His experience provides also demonstrates the concept that *there is no failure, only feedback*. At two separate points in his story, Troy faces significant disappointment – when he is rejected by Sarah Lawrence, and when he drops out of CUNY-Baruch. In neither instance is Troy resigned to his fate. Despite his problems, his attitude stays positive, and he determines to learn from his difficult experiences and to find a school that will be a good fit for him.

Growing Up on the Job

When Josbeth Lebron was 14 she got tired of relying on her parents for money and went out in search of a job. It wasn't until the next year that she found one as a swim instructor for children with autism and other mental illnesses. Josbeth thoroughly enjoyed working with the kids and was sad when the program ended in August. She didn't want to be without a job, and soon found employment serving food and working the register at a bagel shop. However, a month later the owner sold the store and Josbeth found herself unemployed. After taking some time off, she entered a video store to ask if they were hiring, and was told to come back on the weekend. When she did, the manager put her to work on the spot. Josbeth didn't mind the work, but it occupied her entire weekend and paid less than minimum wage. She stayed for three months before a family emergency forced her to go to Puerto Rico. Upon her return she decided not to go back to the video store. Instead, she applied for a position at a shoe store, and was hired three days later.

At the time she wrote her story, a year and a half after beginning work at the shoe store, Josbeth still worked there. In that time she learned a number of important skills, which she discusses. First, the requirement that Josbeth be punctual and abide by the dress code taught her *responsibility*, or *professionalism*. The positive responses she received from her elders as well as from customers demonstrated to her the benefits of acting in this way. She also learned *effective communication* through her interactions with customers. Though it can be difficult, she writes, it's important to keep a positive tone when interacting with customers. Josbeth developed her *patience* and *self-control* skills this way. She acknowledges, however, that sometimes interactions with customers can be extremely frustrating, and this is where *stress management* skills becoming extremely important. For Josbeth, the best way to cope with the stress was to discuss her frustrations with co-worker who always helped her make light of the situation and calm down about it. Lastly, Josbeth mentions that her *social skills* improved through her interactions on the job. By learning how to conduct herself in a professional setting Josbeth found that she was no longer quite as shy with strangers as she had been previously. The only drawback to having worked from so early an age, says Josbeth, is that through much of high school she had very little free time to spend with her friends because she worked so much. But she is clear, nonetheless, that she has no regrets.

Josbeth's story provides a useful springboard for discussing the attitudes and skills which are important for success in the workplace. The most pervasive among them – and the one with which Josbeth chose both to begin and end her story – is *persistence*. Despite her initial expectation that “if I had working papers and a place was hiring, then they had to give me a job,” and her disappointment upon finding that was not the case, Josbeth persevered. It took time, but she finally secured a job. And when her first two permanent jobs (she had previously held a summer position) didn't work out she continued to search until she found one that suited her better. The skills Josbeth discusses next – *responsibility*, *effective communication*, *patience and self control* – read almost like a list, and are thus very clear and straightforward, if not very interesting, conversation pieces. More unusual is her mention of her improved *social skills*. *Working works for you!*, Josbeth says, in addition to your working for it. And it is with this concept of personal fulfillment, a refreshing departure from the constant emphasis on discipline, hard work, and sacrifice which pervade the *Real Jobs* stories (including this

one), that Josbeth concludes her own. Despite the challenges one is likely to encounter in finding and keeping a job, she says, “in the end you’ll find it’s worth it.”

No More Hand Holding

Edgar Lopez took a nonchalant approach to the trip his 8th grade class was taking to visit college campuses. He didn’t expect to take much of what they heard from students and professors seriously, but was looking forward to getting away from his parents and staying with friends in a hotel. Much to his surprise, however, Edgar found that he was affected by the words of one student. “The hardest thing [about going to college] for me was not having teachers who were close to me. I went to a small school in Manhattan like you guys, where all the teachers were supportive and gave students that extra push to succeed. They don’t do that here,” the student said. “He seemed just like us,” writes Edgar, suddenly considering the idea that perhaps he should prepare himself for the inevitable challenge of independence. So he resolved “to go to the root of my problem,” his reliance on a substitute teacher, Ms. Stevenson, who always kept an eye on him to make sure he was doing what he needed to do. Edgar explained his concern to Ms. Stevenson, who agreed that if hoped to learn to be independent she couldn’t supervise him so closely. The experiment did not go as planned. Edgar took the relaxed supervision as an opportunity to slack off, and his grades dropped dramatically. The setback energized Edgar, and he renewed his efforts. His academic struggles continued the following semester, but this time he was determined not to improve. By the end of the year, Edgar was taking his studies much more seriously and getting his work done on his own.

When Edgar boarded the bus on the way to Lincoln University, it had never occurred to him that he might one day have to find ways to motivate himself to succeed. He often “held my work on cruise control,” imagining, it seems, that there would always be someone to put him in a position to succeed and as long as he didn’t completely neglect his responsibility he would be just fine. For the first time, Edgar realized that he could not expect to continuing driving in cruise control – eventually he would have to slow down or speed up, change lanes or even highways, and there would be no one in the passenger seat helping him to do so smoothly.

Edgar’s experience also reinforces an important concept. That is, that there is *no failure, only feedback*. Edgar “felt horrible” when his first report card reflected the fact that he had not succeeded in motivating himself in the absence of Ms. Stevenson’s guidance. But instead accepting his fate or recruiting Ms. Stevenson’s help, Edgar looked at his bad grades as a “reality check.” “Now I knew,” he writes, “what would happen if I wasn’t self-reliant. I needed to get serious about becoming a more independent student.” But although he renewed his commitment to acquiring independence, Edgar continued to struggle, failing biology and doing poorly in math. He was persistent, though, and continued to push himself, feeling proud that at least his work was his alone. “It felt good that I wasn’t going to Ms. Stevenson for help.” By the end of the year Edgar had incorporated consistent studying into his routine, and was rewarded for his efforts with a much improved report card and dramatically increased confidence about his future, “during college and after it.”

There's Always a Choice

As a high school student in special education and living in foster care, Xavier Reyes paid attention in class and received support from his teachers. Nonetheless, he worried about his ability to handle the academic rigors of college. Xavier – who didn't have guardians whom he could rely upon financially – was also concerned about paying for college. He graduated salutatorian from his high school and was granted a \$1000 annual scholarship to attend Pace University, but he wasn't ready for college and soon dropped out. Xavier continued working, but felt a great deal of pressure to return to school, and so he enrolled in a different four-year university. Once again he struggled in school and wasn't earning enough money to justify the hardship. After a year he decided to transfer to a community college, which didn't prove much better. Xavier stayed for two semesters before dropping out and returning to work full time. At this point he was aging out of foster care and felt that he had to make a choice – “do you want to be educated or do you want to survive?” The choice was a clear one. “School had to wait.” Eventually, Xavier became more financially secure and more comfortable living on his own, and he felt he was now better prepared “to handle school and the responsibilities that came with it.” He applied to Baruch College and was not only accepted, but granted a \$20,000 scholarship, which would pay for his tuition. Money did not cease to be a problem, however, and reluctantly Xavier took out loans. This time, Xavier stayed in college for a full four years – all the while working full time – and graduated with a degree in Public Affairs.

In retrospect, Xavier observed that living in foster care gave him the idea “that I didn't have choices.” He felt that his home environment and his success in school were, to a large degree, predetermined. Often times, he says, “no one's guiding” foster kids, who are in need of assistance and positive reinforcement just as much as kids with a more stable family life, if not more. (Xavier's story, in this way, reinforces the importance of *guidance* for any young person to succeed at work, in school, and in life.) “The fact is,” he later realized, “there is always a choice.” The choice he made, after a considerable amount of struggle, was to make the extra effort to succeed, to wait no longer “for someone to show [me] the way” in college.

Xavier's behavior reflected this change in attitude in several ways. First was his decision to return to college even with his knowledge that he would have to continue working to support himself. Granted, it took some time for him to gain the confidence to do so. But as Xavier's experience illustrates, there is nothing wrong with falling down as long as you get back up again. There is *no failure, only feedback* – a concept which Xavier understood and clung to on his way to success in college. Another way Xavier's story reflects his realization that “there is always a choice” is in his decision to take out loans while at Baruch despite working full time and earning a scholarship. He understood that he need not resign himself to his financial limitations, and made a choice to take action to overcome them.

Rewriting My Dream

From the time she was in first grade, Marsha Dupiton knew she would grow up to be a doctor. Even before reaching high school she began to take active steps toward achieving her goal by focusing her attention particularly on her science classes. Even her

disappointing grades did not discourage her. Then, during her freshman year of high school, “everything changed.” One class, Marsha’s English teacher, Mr. James, called her to his desk. She was confused; she had been keeping up with her work and had done nothing to disrupt the class. Why did Mr. James want to speak with her in private? Much to her surprise, he handed her a short story she had written with an “A” at the top of the page. Marsha was speechless. Mr. James told her how good her story was and asked if she had ever considered writing for her own satisfaction, rather than for a grade. She never had, but felt proud to be acknowledged for a specific talent, rather than the general compliments she was used to. That night, Marsha pulled out a notebook and began writing. Doing so “was something entirely different from preparing to be a doctor. Writing made me feel free.” Marsha continued to succeed in English class, and as time went on her enthusiasm about becoming a doctor waned. Instead, she decided, she wanted “a career that incorporated writing and informing people about environmental issues.” Journalism, she thought, was just the thing. So Marsha applied to a rigorous summer journalism workshop and was one of just 10 applicants accepted from a pool of 50. This solidified her confidence in her ability, and helped calm her mother, who was nervous about what seemed, to her, like a sudden – and risky – change of heart. During the workshop, Marsha’s mother changed her attitude completely, becoming interested in and supportive of her writing.

From a very young age, one of the driving forces in Marsha’s life was an appreciation for the sacrifices her parents had made when they left Haiti for the United States. She was conscious of the opportunities growing up in America afforded her, and had every intention taking advantage of them. Her siblings and cousins were equally ambitious, and consequently she felt a great deal of “pressure to become the best.” Marsha makes it clear that this desire to justify her parents’ sacrifices and to make them proud was a primary motivator in her early desire to become a doctor. “If I got a standing ovation for dressing up as a doctor” as a first grader, she wrote, “then I would really be celebrated if I actually became one.

It seems that Marsha’s appreciation for her good fortune and her ambition to succeed which she felt from such a young age influenced her in a very positive way. However, her unwavering assumption that becoming a doctor was the best, if not the only, way to achieve her goals proved an impediment to her own sense of personal fulfillment. Only when Mr. James noticed her talent for writing and suggested that she pursue it did Marsha first consider the possibility that there are multiple paths one can take toward success. Certainly, Mr. James’ role in Marsha’s story illustrates the importance of *guidance* in the lives of young people. But more importantly, Marsha’s experience shows that a predetermined and clearly defined path is not a requirement even for those who are truly motivated to succeed. “For most of my life,” Marsha says, “I never felt I could do something unpredictable... But the paths to becoming a writer are less clear.” Despite the uncertainty for her future inherent in Marsha’s passion for writing, she has no reservations. “I feel that journalism is my pathway to my own personal happiness and success. And at the end of the day, that’s what matters most.”

TRAINING for a Career: How I Got on the Fast Track to Independence

Like Marsha, Zainab Muhammad has parents who impressed upon her from an early age the importance of receiving a higher education. Zainab was taught that the mark

of success was to train as a doctor or a lawyer, and felt a great deal of pressure to fast-track her way into one of those professions. However, unlike Marsha, Zainab never wanted to follow this path. In fact, while still in elementary school, Zainab began to think that she didn't want to attend college at all. She did not enjoy school, and couldn't imagine four years of high school followed by college. Zainab did not subscribe to her parents' view that one who doesn't go to college or join the military is resigned to flipping burgers, and was dismayed at this suggestion. When she first broke the news to her parents that she didn't plan to attend college, Zainab "felt lost." Before long, however, she had an idea. Zainab had always been fascinated by machines; whenever something was broken, she would look inside and see if she could determine how it worked and whether she could fix it. Perhaps, she thought, electronics was the field for her. Aside from her interest in the field, Zainab was also attracted to the financial stability it afforded and the fact that it did not necessarily require a college degree. While still in middle school, Zainab took the initiative to research how she might gain a head start in the field. She came across a school – the East New York High School of Transit Technology – which prepared students for a transit career. Zainab was familiar with the Transit Authority, which employed her father. It seems to her to satisfy both of her main goals – to find a career which interested her, and one which promised financial security. At the time she wrote her story, Zainab was a sophomore, and studying transit industrial electronics.

Despite having chosen to attend a vocational school, Zainab did not feel that she had committed herself to a particular career path. "Sometimes," she writes, "I think I would like to go back to school eventually and become a history teacher." But her decision to study electronics greatly reduced the pressure she felt to make a binding decision about her future. "Picking a job that pays well straight from high school," says Zainab, "gives me the opportunity to make that decision later on down the line." As it turned out, Zainab did indeed make her decision later – she eventually chose to attend college, where she studied political science and sociology.

Zainab's experience shows how far a little bit of *creativity* and some *future planning* can go without compromising one's ability to change directions down the road. She did not accept the path that she felt her parents imposed upon her, yet she never compromised her desire to set her "goals early on, make a solid plan, and stick to it." Like Marsha's, Zainab's story illustrates the fact that there are multiple paths to success, and that one needn't feel pressured to follow a route chosen by someone else.

Community College: A Second Chance

Jordan Temple "used to think community colleges were just a fall-back option if you completely bombed in high school." For this reason, he "felt regretful" when his guidance counselor suggested he look into two-year colleges because his grades weren't strong enough to get him into a four-year college. Nevertheless, he was glad to be able to attend college at all, and resolved to work hard, manage his money, and eventually transfer to a four-year college. Jordan was accepted to several community colleges, from which he chose Onondaga Community College in Syracuse, where he would be able to live in a dorm and experience college life. He was also attracted to Onondaga by the quality of the professors who taught there. Moreover, it seemed a good place for him to pursue his interest in communications, and the credits he earned there would transfer to a

four-year college. Jordan was shy when he first arrived at school, but grew to enjoy dorm life and opened up to his peers. He also built a relationship with one of his professors, who made time to speak with him about his classes and his major, as well as some of his other interests, including issues in the black community and his favorite sport, baseball. In addition, Jordan became involved with the campus community. He joined a program which paired him with a foreign student – a young man from Korea – with whom he talked about cultural issues and built a friendship, and a group which promoted unity among African-American students and provided a forum for them to discuss community issues. But “most importantly,” writes Jordan, “I figured out my study habits.” He found that he could focus best in the library, and spent a great deal of time there. Jordan planned to improve his grades and to transfer to a four-year college.

Most striking about Jordan’s story is the change in his attitude regarding community college. During high school, his perception was that a two-year university was nothing more than a “fall-back option” – a symbol of failure, and an obstacle to be overcome. By the time he wrote his story, Jordan saw community college not as a “disappointment, but a second chance.” Community college provided him with a “clean slate,” and an opportunity to “become more of an individual instead of keeping up my slacker image.” Community college was an excellent opportunity for Jordan to develop to skills he needed to succeed at a four-year college, which he had not put in the effort to learn in high school. “I feel a lot more at peace with myself now,” writes Jordan. “I can see the purpose in everything that I do now, and how doing well in the present will help solidify my future.”

The maturity that community college helped Jordan to develop, and the change in his outlook about both present and future, reinforce the notion that there is *no failure, only feedback*. Rather than allow his disappointment at being initially unable to attend a four-year university, Jordan accepted his situation and made the best of it. As he discovered, community college was not a failure – or a fall-back option – at all. In fact, it was precisely the experience he needed to prepare him for future success in college and beyond. His experience provides a reminder that community college is not a form of punishment, but rather a great opportunity for self-improvement.

Detour to Success

Growing up in foster care, Jarel Melendez felt that a good education was his best chance to get out of the system and away from his surroundings. But despite working hard and graduating second in his class with a 3.6 G.P.A., college didn’t factor into his future plans. He thought it was above him; he didn’t think he would fit in. Jarel took the SAT and filled out some college applications, but it was only because his mentors pushed him to do so. He still didn’t take the idea very seriously, and when he got a job at H&M after high school, he completely abandoned the possibility of going to college. But his mentors continued to press the issue, and a year later Jarel applied to Xavier University in Louisiana and was accepted. He was getting ready to go to Xavier when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, forcing the school to close temporarily. Jarel took this as a sign that he should stay at H&M, which he did. Once again, he had abandoned the idea of going to college.

Some time later Jarel received a phone call from a representative of CUNY-Baruch College who said that he was very inspired by Jarel's college essay, which he had written about growing up in foster care. Jarel had not applied to Baruch, but suspected that his mentor, who is "like a father to me," was responsible. Baruch offered him free tuition, which convinced Jarel to give college a chance. However, he had already committed to an Americorps program called City Year, which he very much wanted to participate in. To his surprise, Baruch agreed to defer his scholarship for a year, allowing him to participate in City Year. The experience was very good for Jarel. He worked in an elementary school, and saw a lot of himself in the kids. Many of them talked about how unhappy they were with their family situations, yet insisted that they would not attend college. College, Jarel told them, was the surest bet for them to escape their surroundings. Eventually it occurred to Jarel that he should "practice what [he's] preaching to these kids" by earning his college degree.

Throughout Jarel's story, the feeling that he was not in control of his own fate is very pervasive. Despite his hard work and success in high school, he felt that he would not succeed in college; when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and prevented him from attending Xavier University, he saw it as evidence of the fact that college was not for him; when he was finally convinced to go to college, it was because it was free, and "why not?" By the time he completed the Americorps program, however, the change in Jarel's attitude is obvious. "I'm so ready [to go to college]!" he writes. Americorps exposed him to young people with various levels of education and different aspirations for their futures. Many of his peers had already earned a college degree, were in the process of doing so, or planned to in the future. For the first time Jarel realized that he was no less capable than other people who earned college degrees. "It opened my eyes and inspired me to want to get my degree too," says Jarel.

Behind the Music

Tabitha knew she wanted to work in the music industry, so she decided to interview Fernando Parra, a senior accountant BMG direct. Tabitha was surprised to find that Parra was "casually dressed, very down to earth and really cool and friendly." He gave Tabitha some advice, which she numbers 1-5. First, he said, it's important to go to college and to carefully choose which courses to take. Specifically, he advised Tabitha, she should take business oriented classes. Second, Parra stressed the importance of having a fallback plan. The industry is constantly changing, he said, and one needs to be able to change with it. He suggested double-majoring, which "speaks volumes" about a person and opens more job options. Third, said Parra, get an internship. Internship experience looks good on a resume, strengthens a person's chances of getting a job after graduation, and provides valuable industry-specific experience. He suggested looking into smaller companies, as the competition at the best-known companies is fierce and often, interns "may only be getting coffee for someone," as opposed to actually participating in the operations. Fourth, Parra recommended maintaining whatever professional connections Tabitha establishes. This includes sending thank you notes after interviews, but does not end there. Sending e-mails or letters or making phone calls in order to stay in touch and inform connections about current activities, Parra said, is also advisable. Tabitha had been considering opening her own company, but Parra suggested gaining experience and establishing connections before taking such a major step. The last

lesson Tabitha learned from Parra was not one he spelled out for her. That is, to “learn from the experts.” After their conversation, Tabitha resolved to pay attention to the words and actions of people more experienced and successful than herself, beginning with Fernando Parra himself.

In a sense, the messages Tabitha conveys in her story appear to be specific to someone interested in a career in the music industry, or most generally, in business. Parra’s advice about what college courses to take, how to keep up with an ever-changing industry, how to obtain an internship, and how to establish and maintain professional connections don’t seem to have much to teach someone whose career aspirations are not quite so developed.

A deeper analysis, however, yields insights that can be useful to anyone. On the most basic level, the very fact that Tabitha took the *initiative* to seek out a person who had achieved success in her desired field is instructive. Whether one wants to learn what it will take to succeed in college, to obtain a good job, or even to figure out what field might be a good fit in the long run, Tabitha’s example is a useful one. Her story also illustrates more specific concepts. For example, she “believed that experience would be more important than any degree, but Parra said you need both.” In this way, Tabitha’s story demonstrates the importance of pursuing an education further than high school. Parra’s emphasis on the appropriate approach to an internship is also useful. It’s important, he said, to have “an open mind and a positive attitude when doing things that you don’t like or have never done.” In other words, doing a job – or taking a college course – is not always easy or fun. But success requires a willingness to fulfill one’s responsibilities, or even to go beyond the call of duty. Indeed, said Parra, “always ask to help and do extra work, especially if you want to be hired after your internship ends.” Keeping an eye on the *big picture* can transform what seemed like a chore into an opportunity.

Young and Hungry

Three years into studying video editing in college, Joseph Alvarez secured an internship at HBO Studio Production with relative ease. He was new to many of the operations at HBO, and was a little bit nervous. But Joseph was confident he would quickly learn his way around; after all, he was “young, hungry, and willing to work [his] butt off.” His hard work paid off. When his internship came to an end after six months, HBO hired him. “Even after I got the job,” he says, “I never let up. I took on every day as if it were my last.” Before long, however, HBO began to cut back on spending, and was forced to let some employees, including Joseph, go. He was devastated. Over the next year, he searched tirelessly for a new job, but had no success. Joseph began to question whether he should continue looking for a job in film editing. However, he writes, it “was the only thing I had some sort of skill in,” and he felt no choice in the matter. In the meantime, he took odd jobs, which didn’t do much to raise his morale. By this time he had a college degree, and he found himself doubting its value.

Fortunately for Joseph, by this time an unemployed 25-year-old, his downward spiral was not to last. One day, he went to a youth organization to get help with his resume, and was given a copy of *Represent*, Youth Communication’s magazine. Looking through it, he saw an advertisement for writers, and decided to pursue the opportunity.

The magazine's editor invited Joseph to come in to speak with her. When they met, Joseph told her that he was a film editor; as it happened, her husband was a producer, and she arranged for them to meet the following week. The editor's husband worked for *Noggin*, a children's TV station, and he introduced Joseph to the human resources director. Joseph had an interview, but months went by and he heard nothing more from *Noggin*. He had gotten his hopes up and they had been dashed; he was, he said, at lower than rock bottom. "I hit the rock and crashed through it," he writes. Then, much to his surprise, Joseph received a call from his interviewer at *Noggin*, who asked if he was still interested in the position. She explained that it wouldn't be permanent, but they needed him to work on a project during the summer that might take seven days a week. Joseph took the job. At first it was difficult; it had been a long time since he had done film editing, and he struggled. So he began staying after work to re-learn the computer programs. Soon, his editing skills began to return to him, along with his confidence. Joseph spent the rest of the summer working 50 hour weeks, and making \$30 an hour. He did his best to seem "eager and positive," hoping that "someone would recognize my hunger and want to keep me around." When the project ended, *Noggin* decided to keep Joseph on for about 10 days out of the month. When he wrote his story, Joseph was "pretty much out of the rut" he had fallen into before he found work with *Noggin*, but he still worried that his luck could change. However, he knew that it was his "determination and hard work" that led to his success, which led to his conclusion that "I think I will be fine, as long as my hunger never goes away."

Joseph's story has several strengths. First among them is that Joseph, when he wrote the story, was not entirely removed from his frustration. This fact lends his narrative a sense of immediacy and force that makes it engaging and interesting. In addition, one notices that as low as he felt, Joseph never stopped trying. He began the story "young and hungry," continued to search for a job after a year without success, and never let up even after finding *Noggin*. Joseph's story provides a powerful illustration of the importance of *persistence*. The story is, however, atypical for *Real Jobs*, mainly because of his age and the fact that it begins when he was already well on his way to earning a college degree. It may be hard for many high school students – the target audience – to relate to someone who earned \$30 an hour working for a prestigious production company, even if he did struggle afterwards. Moreover, even by the story's end Joseph was not confident in his ability, as a college graduate, to keep a job. This is a risky message to present youth who may already be ambivalent toward the idea of attending college.

In the Driver's Seat: Setting Goals Gets You on the Road: Here's How to Get Going

Xavier Reyes begins his story with two questions: "How many times have you heard your teacher, counselor, or parent ask you what your goals are? And how many times did you answer that you didn't know, or just gave them any old answer that would shut them up?" He acknowledges that being asked about your goals can be annoying, but stresses the importance of the question. Without goals, he says, "we would be like drivers without destinations, driving round and round without really going anywhere." In addition to providing direction, goals "let us be in the driver's seat for a change." Teens are often given very little control over their own lives, and setting concrete goals can be a way to take command. Xavier illustrates this with an example from his past: as a 17 year

old living in a group home, he wanted badly to live on his own and to be financially independent. He made it his goal to do so, and achieved this by the time he was 21 and aged out of foster care. How did he do it? First he set his goal – to be independent – then he worked out a game plan. He searched for a job and an apartment, and gathered the things he would need to show a potential landlord. Just setting goals and determining a game plan, however, is not sufficient. The next step, says Xavier, is “putting the game plan into action.” “If you’re like me,” he writes, “this is the hard part – getting off our butts and doing what we need to do to reach our goals.”

At this point, Xavier points out how crucial it is to set strong, realistic goals, rather than weak, unrealistic ones. A weak goal is one “that you are going to achieve whether or not you put work into it.” A goal should push a person to higher levels of achievement. At the same time, of course, setting a goal that one can’t possibly achieve can only lead to disappointment. In sum, says Xavier, “a good, strong goal is one that is measurable, that is very clear, and that is achievable.” Lastly, Xavier outlines a list of strategies, based on the concepts he discusses, designed to help teens set and achieve their goals. The list includes writing and refining a list of goals; ordering the goals in terms of importance; determining, as specifically as possible, what actions are necessary to make each goal a reality; deciding on a specific deadline for each goal; and sticking with the list, as frustrating as it can be at times. “If you want something,” he says, “get up and make it happen for yourself. You can do it.”

Xavier’s narrative style, which is casual and conversational, is a major strength in this story. He clearly has the authority to speak about his subject – goal setting and fulfillment – as he has succeeded in those very areas. But his tone is not preachy or condescending, and he effectively conveys the things he had in common with many teens likely to encounter his story. His anecdote about feeling helpless and unable to control his life, particularly as a result of living in a group home, reflects a theme that echoes throughout many *Real Jobs* stories, suggesting that this feeling is common. In addition to being highly readable, Xavier’s story provides specific advice about how to achieve the desired result, be it *acquiring independence* or anything else. While most stories discuss *what* to do, Xavier addresses *how* to do it. And all the while, he provides words of encouragement which ring sincere as he, not long ago a foster child himself, followed the plan he advocates here.

My Summer in Politics

Desiree Bailey met Councilwoman Gale Brewer while covering a teen voting rights rally outside New York’s City Hall for Youth Communication. They spoke for a few minutes, and Desiree “admired her straightforward attitude and responses to my questions.” Councilwoman Brewer gave Desiree her business card in case she had further questions. Later, Desiree learned that she needed an internship as a requirement for her high school’s law program, and remembered that she had Councilwoman Brewer’s card. She assumed that as a high school student, she would be too young, but thought, “what’s the worst that can happen?” Desiree emailed Brewer’s office, and three weeks later she received a response from her chief of staff requesting a resume. She immediately sent her resume, and three weeks later got a response asking her to come to the office for an interview. Desiree dressed professionally, and during the interview talked about her interests in anthropology, journalism, and public policy. She felt good about the

interview, and several weeks later received an email informing her that she would be a summer intern. Desiree would be doing a lot of office work, she was told, but would also have the opportunity to work on a project. Desiree imagined “grumpy, distant politicians” who had “replaced all memory of why they ever got into politics with concerns about photo-ops and their own personal agendas.” She was pleasantly surprised, however, when she arrived in the office and met “a lot of down-to-earth, lively people.” Brewer’s staff was composed of college graduates, and there were also college interns, as well as a few high school students.

Desiree’s main responsibilities included answering phone and checking messages and e-mails, but she was also assigned a major project – drafting budget response letters to non-profit organizations informing them how much money the city would be granting them. She learned that a lot of meticulous work goes into something seemingly so simple as a letter, and felt “overjoyed” when she completed about 100 letters after “about two weeks of almost non-stop work.” At one point, Desiree went to watch Gale conduct an interview on Fox 5 News about a bedbug infestation in many of the city’s apartment buildings. Her internship experience, Desiree says, affected her greatly. First, it changed her perception of politicians, or at least what politicians should be. Above all else, she learned, “they are servants of the people,” and should be primarily concerned with “what is best for us.” Second, she was impressed by the ability that people have to influence change in their communities. “I think all residents of the city,” she writes, “should lobby to improve their communities. Third, the experience increased Desiree’s self confidence. In addition to the expectation that she would fulfill her responsibilities, she was treated “like an adult who could produce great ideas.” Lastly, Desiree learned never to “dismiss an opportunity simply because it seems out of reach at the moment.”

The inclusion of Desiree’s story in the *Real Jobs* anthology is ostensibly for a specific purpose; it is under the “What’s It Like to Work In...” section. Certainly, it provides useful information about what it is like to work with a politician. But there is a more universal message, as well. That is one of *personal efficacy*, which guides the story from beginning to end. Despite her doubts about her age, Desiree decided to inquire about an internship – an effort that paid off. Her work during the internship, as well, produced a sense of satisfaction and confidence in her abilities. And reinforcing this theme is her observation that politicians are, above all, responsible for responding to the needs and concerns of their constituents who, if they take the initiative, can actually have considerable influence over their communities.

A Big Kid Takes Charge

When Lucas Mann got a job as a summer camp counselor at the Jack and Jill School Summer Camp in Manhattan, he assumed it would be an easy paycheck. He had never worked in child care before, but was so excited about the money he would make that “a tornado wasn’t going to worry [him].” It wasn’t until the morning of his first day that Lucas considered that the job might not be quite as easy as he’d expected. He saw a mother unsuccessfully trying to get her toddler to stop crying, and realized that he had no idea how he would handle such a situation. However, aside from a slightly nerve-wracking experience with a camper’s joking father, Lucas’ first day at camp went well. A few weeks later, though, he was forced to confront the fact that his “15-year-old mind wasn’t that much more mature than your average toddler’s” when a 5-year-old camper

challenged his ability to hit a waffle ball farther than he – the child – could. Lucas took the bait and hit the ball out of the field and into the street, where it was whisked away by a moving taxi and lost. He “felt ridiculous” for his actions. It wasn’t long before Lucas encountered another difficulty. When a 4-year-old camper pulled down his bathing suit to reveal that he hadn’t made it to the toilet, Lucas, instead of helping the child, yelled “Holy God!” and ran for the door. Needless to say, this reaction did nothing to calm the already embarrassed child. Instead, one of the head teachers cleaned the child up while Lucas “cowered in the bathroom, peering out now and then to see if they’d finished.”

Nevertheless, Lucas says, he became the kids’ favorite. Many of the other counselors and teachers were much older, and he was “the cool uncle” to the children. Sometimes, though, his coolness was a problem. For example, while the other counselors were trying to do a headcount during a field trip to Central Park, Lucas found himself being swarmed by his “female fans,” and did nothing to discourage it. Although the other counselors found the extent to which the children adored Lucas amusing, his “immaturity was never far from [his] mind.” In addition, he struggled with certain concepts that he was expected to convey to the children. “I kept wondering how I was supposed to tell a kid not to hit somebody who just punched him in the face,” Lucas writes. “In my book, he deserves it. I don’t care about him being the bigger person, but apparently I should.” These issues caused Lucas to question whether he should return to camp the following summer. His co-workers encouraged him to, he enjoyed the work and knew that the responsibility was good for him, but he still had doubts. Lucas’ decision became easier later in the year when he made a traveling summer baseball team. “The baseball field is testosterone-laden and immature, the traits that I had a hard time holding back at camp,” says Lucas. “I simply couldn’t resist.” So instead of returning to camp, Lucas plans to “spend [his] summer vacation spitting, cursing, and making stupid, dirty jokes.” His memories of the camp, though, are fond; he hopes to return to camp for a visit and “feel free to just be one of the kids.”

Lucas’s story demonstrates some of the pitfalls of working in child care. His experience shows that it can be hard, while still a teen, to act in a mature and responsible way around children. Indeed, the main reason his experience is instructive is precisely because he fails so completely in certain regards. Lucas makes clear that he was conscious of the inappropriateness of some of his actions even as he did them. Moreover, he failed entirely to change his attitude by the end of the summer. Granted, he was only 16 when he wrote the story. But anyone, regardless of age, is expected to follow the *unwritten rules of the workplace*. In his case, these included (but were certainly not limited to) setting a positive example for the children; providing assistance – without causing embarrassment – when someone is in need; and aiding other staff members in fulfilling their responsibilities. Lucas, by neglecting these *unwritten rules*, helps to illustrate their importance.

A New Experience

The first internship Lyn Christensen ever had was at the Whitney Museum of American Art. A ninth-grader at the time, she was interested in a career in the arts and felt it would be a good experience. Lyn expected to learn about different artists and was told that by the end of her time at the museum she would be expected to design and give a tour to elementary school students. She was nervous when she arrived for her first

day at the museum, but her supervisor answered all her questions and got her settled in all the supplies she would need. Lyn spent most of her time in the education department which is responsible for identifying paintings and sculptures that appeal to children and to facilitate discussion about the pieces when groups of kids come to the museum. Lyn went on many tours in preparation to lead one herself, and she spent a great deal of time choosing pieces she felt children would like and thinking about how best to facilitate discussion about them. When the day of her tour arrived Lyn was very nervous. Once she began speaking, however, she “was a completely different person.” Instead of feeling like a kid “who fooled around in class,” she said, “I was the teacher.” Lyn gained a lot from the experience – she learned basic office skills, observed how the staff solved problems, made new friends, and felt much more mature than she had before.

Aside from the concrete information about her responsibilities working in a museum, what stands out most about Lyn’s story is the transformation in her attitude when the time comes for her to lead a tour. Right up to the moment when she began speaking, Lyn was nervous and unsure of herself; as soon as she began, however, the role suddenly felt natural to her. Her experience provides a direct response to anyone who might say, “But I’m just a kid! I can’t do that job, it’s not me.” Lyn learned that in life, people play different roles – sometimes as student, other times as teacher; sometimes as kid, other times as responsible adult. A person is not defined by – or limited to – any particular role. As Lyn’s story demonstrates, all it takes to succeed in an unfamiliar role is some effort and a positive attitude.

Out into the World

Kanwal Javaid spent from 4:30 a.m to 3:30 p.m. on weekends at a magazine store in Laguardia Airport. “It’s interesting to see people that early in the morning,” she says. “Some are sleepy and some are really fresh.” Kanwal enjoyed meeting so many people from all over the world. She relates an anecdote about a guy who came to the store looking for “souvenirs for girls.” He had been so busy during his weekend in New York that he hadn’t gotten anything for his girlfriend. Kanwal directed him to the section where they kept T-shirts for girls, and he came back with a pile of items. They shared a laugh about how special his girlfriend would feel when she saw how much attention he had paid her while he was away. Moments like these, she says, happen many times a day. She also enjoys watching people rush around – “it feels like life is moving quickly around me.”

Kanwal’s discipline in rising so early in the morning and spending 11 hours of each weekend day at work is admirable. Her observation that so many different kinds of people converge upon a major airport like Laguardia, even so early in the morning, is interesting. However, Kanwal hardly relates any specific information about her job, and provides very few, if any, points of departure for conversation about what it takes to succeed at work.

Speeches and Bingo

The main responsibility assigned to Jordan Yue when he worked for New York City’s Department of Health and Mental Hygiene as part of the Public Health Youth Corps was speaking at senior citizen centers and day camps about the dangers of West Nile virus and tobacco use. He worked with four other 16- and 17-year-olds, and they

took turns standing in front of the groups and attempting to educate them about various aspects of the issues. At the beginning of the summer, public speaking made Jordan extremely nervous. Before he began talking – particularly to the groups of senior citizens – he could feel his face turning red as he hoped upon hope that he wouldn't screw up. Sometimes he struggled with his words, but knew that he had no choice but to keep going. Jordan always felt relieved when he finished his section and turned over the podium to one of his co-workers. After speaking, they would play bingo with the seniors. "It felt good," Jordan writes, "knowing that we'd brightened up their lives." He was less sure, though, about the seniors' reception to the health education. "You telling us not to smoke," one senior citizen said, "is the equivalent of us telling you teenagers not to have sex."

By contrast, Jordan felt more relaxed and confident about presenting to the kids. "They seemed more attentive than the seniors did," he says, "maybe because we were 'big kids' to the little kids, but to some of the seniors, we were young whippersnappers trying to tell them how to live their lives." After speaking, they would take questions from the children and handed out comic books which related to the issues they had covered. Jordan writes that he learned a lot from the job, including just how diverse the borough of Queens is. The group traveled to many different neighborhoods, all of which had different characters and were comprised of different ratios of the various ethnic groups. However, the "ultimate reward" of the experience, writes Jordan, was that he was able to practice public speaking – a skill which he expects to use in the future.

Though it must have been frustrating for Jordan and his co-workers to see that some senior citizens, rather than paying attention to the presentation, "would do their crossword puzzles," this observation is an important one. Jordan recognized that some of the seniors were simply not interested in what he had to say. In fact, some, like the person who criticized their discussion of using tobacco, did not appreciate being lectured by kids. Jordan's awareness of the seniors' reactions to his group reflects a very important skill for any workplace environment. This skill can be referred to as *empathy* – the capacity to internalize (and to act upon) someone else's feelings. Jordan's story also emphasizes the importance of *persistence*. Although he did not enjoy speaking in public, he found that the more he did it, the easier it became. As a result of this practice, he found that his public speaking ability had markedly improved by the end of the summer, and anticipated it being useful to him later in life.

Biking for Dollars

Damien Nesbit enjoyed riding his bike when he was a child, but it spent many years sitting untouched in his garage. It wasn't until he needed a way to get around on his own while studying and living with cousins in Puerto Rico that he learned the pleasures of bike riding. During this time he routinely made the two or three mile trip between his cousins' house and the town, and grew to enjoy the ride more and more each time. He even enjoyed the uphill ride home, which was very challenging – he'd feel a "natural high" he says, in addition to the sense of accomplishment he felt upon completion. "The whole process," Damien writes, "became an addiction." When he returned to New York he found that a friend was getting paid to ride his bike by messengering for a local company. "With my new attitude," he says, "bicycle messengering was beginning to seem not only possible, but actually enticing." Damien "wanted to test the limits of [his]

newfound passion.” Fortunately, his friend was planning on leaving his job and arranged to have Damien take it. The interview process was straightforward, and he got started the following week. He arrived at work early on Monday, and his boss explained the process to him: a run consists of two parts, a pick-up and a drop-off. A dispatcher gives the messenger the addresses, “then you’re on your own, with up to an hour and a half to get the package delivered.” The messenger records the details of his runs on something called a manifest. Damien’s boss gave him a beeper, and told him to wait for an assignment which, because he was a rookie, might take a while. Luckily, though, Damien was able to help the dispatcher with the location of a particular pick-up, and he was rewarded with the assignment. His first run was all the way uptown, so he took the train partway. It went smoothly, and his first day ended with eight runs on his manifest.

The next section of Damien’s story talks in detail about the pleasures, challenges, and hazards of being a bike messenger in a busy city like New York. His descriptions and analysis are vivid and interesting, and the information he provides is instructive to anyone who might care to ride. But the story also reads as an extended metaphor for navigating the workplace – and life in general – and it is useful to read it this way. Damien begins by talking about the “alarming rate” at which city traffic moves, and the endurance required to keep up with it. The real challenge, though, is “having to break suddenly for jay-walking pedestrians and non-signaling taxicabs.” Indeed, professional life moves quickly, and it is a challenge to keep up. But it’s very important to stay under control and to be aware, because sometimes a quick stop or a change of direction may be necessary. However, says Damien, though he tries to be careful, “nobody’s perfect. This year alone I’ve hit three pedestrians and one car.” Fortunately, neither he nor any of the pedestrians he hit have been hurt. So too, in life and at work, accidents happen; it is important to minimize them by being aware, and when possible, to “make a turn in order to avoid a collision.” Damien also relates situation in which he was nearly run off the road by a van which was, despite having no signal on, turning right. In such scenarios, he says, he is forced to make “split second decisions.” Sometimes a tough decision doesn’t allow a person to deliberate; at those times it is important to trust your intuition and act with confidence. When a van is about to cut you off, there is one thing worse than a wrong decision: indecision. On the other hand, when there is time to anticipate a difficult or treacherous situation, the best thing to do may be to stop and wait until it is safe to proceed. In other words, trusting a gut reaction to make a *crossroad decision* may sometimes be necessary, but it is not ideal.

At a certain point, after a person has applied a great deal of *discipline, practice,* and *determination*, a job may become almost second-nature. Damien talks about getting into the “flow” of bike riding; the same concept can be applied to any activity which requires skill. Hard work, Damien’s experience illustrates, pays off with improved results. Nevertheless, there are rules of the road, and whether it is a police officer or a boss enforcing them, nobody – no matter how skilled – is exempt. But cops, remembers Damien, are not the “worst nuisances cyclists have to put up with.” That designation, rather, belongs to the elements, which was a lesson he learned the hard way – through a long, wet, unhappy day. Sometimes the going gets tough, and nobody is to blame. The only thing to do in those situations is to remember that “hindrances do have a positive side,” even if it is as simple as an opportunity to learn and to be better prepared for the future. Damien concludes by observing that “the strangest sensation the whole experience

of cycling has produced for me is the stirring of athletic desire.” In this way, he writes, “cycling has made a permanent impression on my life.” Thus his parting message: it sure doesn’t hurt to enjoy your job.

Learning to Care

Sheela Pai wanted “something different” to spend her summer doing, and when she saw a flier advertising a six-week internship at Coler Memorial Hospital, she thought it was just the thing. She imagined that the internship would be easy, probably consisting of pushing patients around in wheelchairs, and perhaps reading to them from books. Sheela arrived on the first day “ready to jump into the world of medical careers,” but was informed that all interns first had to complete a week of medical training. In addition to preparing the interns for their duties, the training taught them about patients’ rights and about the importance of listening to the sick and elderly people and of being sensitive to their situations. There were also activities designed to help the interns understand the lives of some patients, which included doing certain activities with blindfolds on and going up a ramp in a wheelchair. The extensive training was not the only thing that caught Sheela by surprise; the dreariness of the hospital and the unkempt, even dirty, appearance of many of the patients contrasted with the image of “a nice little hospital with freshly tiled walls and happy patients carrying get-well cards and balloons” that she had developed before arriving. Sheela realized that to many of the hospital’s patients, this was home; if they had relatives, they were not there to take care of them. She was assigned to spend half of each day with two patients: Ms. H. and Ms. N. She met Ms. H. first, and struggled from the outset to establish a rapport. Ms. H. was generally very quiet, and seemed not to be very interested in Sheela, who wondered how she would “survive the next six weeks with her.” Her next patient, however, was different. Ms. N. was “full of life.” They found plenty to talk about, and Ms. N. even told her stories about her family and about her youth. As time went on, Sheela continued to enjoy the time she spent with Ms. N., and managed to improve her relationship with Ms. H., who told her some things about her background. “For the first time,” writes Sheela, “I saw her maternal side.” When Sheela asked Ms. H. about her daughter, however, she struck a sore spot. Apparently, her daughter lived in California and rarely visited. Sheela realized “how hard it must be for Ms. H. to open up after being betrayed and forgotten by her own child.”

In addition to the time spent with patients, the interns also learned about medicine. Each Friday afternoon they would either listen to a lecture or visit a particular ward. One of the most memorable of these experiences, says Sheela, was the visit to the AIDS ward. At first she was inhibited by “naïve fears,” and put her hands deep into her pockets so as not to have any skin exposed. After a while, though, she began to open up and to listen more to what the doctors were saying. It helped that a young man in his twenties who bedridden, crippled by the disease, still managed to smile and joke with the interns. “It was like he had an invincible spirit,” says Sheela. But despite her good intentions, Sheela left unsure whether she had “enough stamina to face this kind of suffering again.”

Sheela learned that “paralysis and other handicaps are a way of life for the people who have them and should be treated like that by the rest of us.” This realization is a part of the theme which is most salient throughout Sheela’s story: *empathy*. As soon as the

interns arrived at the hospital, the importance of understanding the lives and feelings of the residents was emphasized to them. Indeed, Sheela came to understand the concept for herself, particularly through her interactions with Ms. H. Other aspects of Sheela's story are also useful subjects for analysis. For example, her statement that her personal growth was more important to her than the impact she was able to make on the patients' lives is complex, and somewhat controversial. Is a person's job just about them? What constitutes personal growth? Is there such a thing as true selflessness? This story, when probed, deals with ideas which are more profound than those found in many others, and presents them in an appealing, unintimidating way.

Climbing the Golden Arches

Marissa Nunez, along with her cousin Susie, decided one day to walk into McDonald's and apply for jobs. About a month after filling out her application, Marissa got a call requesting that she come to the store for an interview. She was asked if she would be willing to do certain tasks, such as cleaning the bathrooms, and said she would. Both Marissa and Susie were hired on the spot. They had applied on a whim, and Marissa hadn't expected it to work. She was pleased, though, because she would no longer rely on her mother for money. A week and a half later they went to get their uniforms and find out their work schedules. They were also told about the rules of the workplace, some of which, like "no stealing," were more obvious than rules like "leave your problems at home." The next step was training; before they could start working, they had to learn how to work station, from "fried products" to the grill, the assembly station, the French fry station, and lastly the register. The grill was most difficult, but Marissa got the hang of it after a several weeks of practice. Their first real day at work happened to be the grand opening of the newly remodeled store. Marissa and Susie raced to see who could serve more customers, and had a lot of fun doing it. Susie only stayed at the store for three months, but Marissa stayed on. She liked having a job "because [she] was learning how to be a responsible person." She was also making friends with coworkers, who would sometimes make up games and events to make work more fun, and meeting lots of customers.

Working at McDonald's, though, does have its downside. Marissa says that some customers can be "real jerks" sometimes. The employees are under a lot of pressure, and some customers don't seem to understand that; some even try to short change the store for money if they get a chance. Once a customer started yelling about how an employee had overcharged her, despite Marissa's knowledge that that wasn't the case. She started cursing at Marissa, who was forced to go to the manager for help. Another time, a woman returned to the store to accuse an employee of giving her counterfeit money with her change, which of course, was not true. She got so angry that the manager was forced to call the police. On the other hand, some customers are very friendly, and go out of their way to say good things to the manager about Marissa and other employees. Every six months each employee's performance is evaluated, and a good review earns a raise and possibly a promotion. Marissa got both – she was made a crew trainer. A year after that, Marissa was asked if she'd like to train to be a manager, which meant her performance had been 100% on all stations of the store. She accepted, and began her training. At the time she wrote her story she had been at McDonald's for more than two years, and was in

the process of taking a class to prepare her for the managerial exam. She was still in high school at the time, and was considering staying at McDonald's when she graduated.

Marissa's experience at McDonald's shows what a person can achieve with some *hard work, persistence, patience, and a positive attitude*. The most important thing she learned, Marissa writes, "is that you have to start at the bottom and work your way up." She was certainly rewarded for climbing the ladder. Another lesson Marissa's story illustrates is the opportunities that result from *taking initiative*. Looking at what she was able to achieve in two years, it's amazing to look back at the fact that she got the job just by walking into the store one day and asking for an application. Marissa's story provides powerful evidence of the fact that career opportunities are available to anyone who is willing to put in the effort.

Going Back to Preschool

Gamal Jones first considered working with children three years before writing his story. He was looking for meaningful work, wanted to be close to home, and was intrigued by the many attractive female employees at the local daycare center. He also enjoyed being around children, "the last people left on earth who do and say what they truly feel." However, Gamal was turned down for a job at a daycare center because he lacked experience. Over the next several years, he worked at an auto parts store and a gift shop, and wrote for Youth Communication. Eventually, Gamal lost his gift shop job and six months later he was facing the end of his unemployment checks. Fortunately for him, his brother's girlfriend was looking for a teaching assistant at a local preschool. Gamal interviewed and was invited to observe a class to get a sense of what the job would entail. The following week, having heard nothing more from the school, he called to see if he could volunteer in the classroom. He was surprised when he was asked if he would be interested in a part-time position, which he immediately accepted.

Five months into his job at the preschool, Gamal had gotten a good handle on the routine. As a teacher's aide, his responsibilities centered on taking care of "the odds and ends" so the teacher can focus on the students and their needs. He was learning a lot from the two teachers he worked with – particularly by observing the influence they have over the children. "I don't have the glow – that gift of influence over the children – yet," he writes. Gamal also enjoyed the 3 and 4 year olds in his class a great deal. They taught him "more about human nature than anything I could read in books." He recognized the emotions – so raw and exposed in children – in himself and even in much older people. "Adults don't behave the exact same way," Gamal observes, "...but the emotions are the same – we just disguise them better." Indeed, it is this honesty that Gamal so admires. "These kids," he says, "remind me how to interact in a real and honest way."

The central theme of Gamal's story revolves around his observations about children, and human nature in general. His statement about interacting with other people "in a real and honest way" provides a point of departure for conversations about genuine, productive forms of communication – important concepts for success in any kind of workplace. Another of Gamal's ideas – that adults, when frustrated, "write songs, drink, cheat on our partners or steal" – is controversial, and raises questions about stress management and conflict resolution. Are these productive means of solving, or coping with, a problem? What ways might be better?