

# Young Adult Program Puts Lives Back Together

BY SASHA AUSTRIE

Their stories are different, but their mistakes and triumphs are the same.

The students of the Young Adult Internship Program are taking advantage of the chances afforded to them.

Bridgette Torres was sure her life would be played out behind a retail counter. Torres had given up; the YAIP resurrected her dreams and gave her new possibilities.

At 22, Torres has already experienced a violent marriage and motherhood. There it was; a flyer about YAIP daring her to change her life and make a difference. She said she saw the flyer on her way to a retail job interview.

"[YAIP] has given me a sense of purpose," she said. "It has given me a sense of accomplishment and a sense I'm actually needed."

YAIP is a 14-week internship program for low-income New York City Adults, ages 16 to 24. The program is comprised of a three-week paid orientation followed by an 11-week paid internship at area businesses.

James Bethea, a counselor for the program, has been with the program since its inception earlier this year.

"This is a great program for the kids, especially the disconnected youth," Bethea said. "I'm glad to be part of the program."

Unlike Torres, who had a conventional childhood, the perils of life were already stacked against Raymond Jacob, 21. He

was born to a drug addicted mother and an absent father. Fortunately, he was placed in the care of his grandmother through foster care. Even though he was placed in his grandmother's care he lacked guidance and stability, which came from the uncertainty surrounding his future. He aged out of foster care and his struggles were essentially just beginning.

"I went job hunting everyday," he said. "I hit every store on Jamaica Avenue."

The urgency in his job search was compounded by his day to day struggle for survival. At the behest of a friend, Jacob contacted the YAIP.

"The program came at such a valuable time," he said. "The doors are always open. I came crying tears, and there shoulders and arms were always open."

For Jacob, the internship program was a launching pad for his dreams. He is currently enrolled at York College with hopes to be a gym teacher.

"We are not here to settle," Suzanne Jones, director of YAIP, said. "We are here to connect them back to society."

Jones said although Jacob was excelling, he still faced hardship - tuition and living expenses. Jones said she and Bethea did something that they would not normally do.

"He came with the basic drive that he wanted to succeed," she said. "How can we let this person fail? We helped him get into college. We did whatever we could we bought him food, metro cards, helped out with tuition," she said.

Teshara Allen, 18, had a hiccup in her future plans when she became pregnant. Unable to finish high school, Allen shelved her dreams to become a dancer and focused on motherhood and helping take care of her siblings.

"Without this program, I would be still out there trying to maintain," she said. "The program provides a support system. When people outside your family believes in you, it makes your self esteem rise."

Adrian Asonye, 24, doesn't know exactly when he stopped appreciating the structure of his life. Nonetheless he dropped out of college with little to fall back on.

"I'm mad at myself," he said. "I've had a lot of missed opportunities."

To Asonye, the YAIP program means "getting my life back together," he said. He added that YAIP has made a bright future possible. He hopes to go back to school and obtain a degree in computer science.

The program is funded by the Department of Youth and Community Development and housed in Roy Wilkins Park on Baisley Boulevard. For information about the program call (718) 276-4600.



Staff and students of YAIP