

“Do you want fries with that job, or do you want something more?”

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Photo Beth Moncrief, Genesysworks

Chee Lee and Sined Manasra at Medtronic (picture on right)

Chee Lee (left) and Tou Yer Xiong, learning to take apart a computer and put it back together (picture on left)

Their brochure asks youngsters, “Do you want fries with that job, or do you want something more?” A fascinating new program named Genesysworks encourages high school seniors to go for something more. There are so many good things about this organization, it’s hard to know where to start.

The idea, in part, is to help high school seniors from low income families find jobs in companies like Target, Xcel Energy, 3M, Travelers, Medtronic, Best Buy and Thrivent Financial. Based on a similar Houston program that began in 2002, Genesys is designed to “reinvigorate youngsters interest and learning,” according to executive director Jeff Tollefson. Youngsters are doing “hands-on” learning as they

- configure (computer) servers for new Best Buy stores
- provide desk support at 3m, Travelers and Medtronic
- configure and deploy computers for Xcel employees

They also are learning job skills — responsibility, reliability, collaboration. Genesysworks also helps them visit campuses, write college applications, and find scholarships. The jobs allow youngsters to see a better future. The support helps them move toward that future.

A former Compaq computer executive who re-examined his life after 9/11 started the original Houston program. He wanted to make more of a difference. Hundreds of young people have gone through the Houston program since it started in 2002.

Tollefson, who worked in venture capital for 16 years, has a hard time sitting still as he describes how rewarding the new program is. "We are seeing dramatic changes in young people, some of whom were headed the wrong way." He described one youngster who formerly was in a gang but now is extremely responsible and headed to college.

He and Beth Moncrief, Genesysworks program manager, cited one participant who brought in a new handbag. "It's one of the first things I bought for myself," she explained. Many of the young people in the program are contributing money they earn in Genesysworks to their family. Moncrief, points out, "some of them are the only people in their family with a steady job."

Genesysworks is looking for urban or suburban East Metro participants for its program next year. Their salaries are paid by the companies that contract with Genesysworks to employ them 4 hours/ day. The program has grown from 16 young people last year to 45 this year, and a projected 100 next year.

Once a week they also perform some community service, like a toy drive, assisting with a prairie restoration, or handing out food and helping clean up at the Twin Cities Marathon.

There's nothing wrong with jobs in "fast food" industries. But Genesysworks helps young people see the kind of future available in growing technical fields. Tollefson says he is "having the time of his life"; helping these young people increase their aspirations. Interested young people or company officials who might be interested can go to www.gensysworks.org website, or call 651 789-0088. As a brochure explains, helping these youngsters to succeed in life "is not just the right thing to do, but the smart thing to do."