

MENTORING

Program teaches at-risk youth about life, work

Students learn through effort between AT&T, Junior Achievement

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THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

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Through a national partnership between Junior Achievement and AT&T, a group of Centennial High School students recently learned some vital life lessons about decision-making and dedication.

The AT&T Aspire program paired call center leaders and employees with the at-risk high schoolers for an afternoon that included a tour of the center, instruction on making an impression with a potential employer, a discussion on the qualities that make up a strong character, as well as the dangers of texting and driving.

All in the name of inspiring these young men and women to complete high school studies before making their mark in the working world.

"Through this job-shadowing program, the kids are here to gain more tools to make good choices in life," said Amanda Vargas, a team leader at the call center. "Because the choices they make now are going to stick with them for the rest of their lives.

"And they also are learning about behaviors and what they will need in the workforce before

they get there. They're learning about entrepreneurship, how businesses function and what their role can be in the future."

From call center managers, the students learned that a "dream job" doesn't simply materialize. Rather, it's an incremental journey up the workforce ladder, during which collected experiences eventually pave the way for something bigger and better.

"No matter what you do, it all starts with a first step," the students were told by Layla Vigil. "When we do interviews as managers, and I hear someone say, 'I had to do this, but this is what I learned,' and they have that passion, that amazes me.

"This person worked at McDonald's, but they did everything they could to be the best they could at that position and they learned something from it. And that's the person I'd hire."

In the end, Vigil said, it's the "small things," often seen as insignificant, that "build you into the person you want to be."

The partnership's purpose, according to



CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/BRYAN KELSEN

Durren McKesson, 16 (right), makes use of a virtual car experience as classmate Connor Hinshaw, 17, looks on during a visit to the AT&T call center in a Junior Achievement partnership effort that took place Nov. 16.

Mary Hammer, local executive director of Junior Achievement, "is increasing performance and work ethic in those middle and high schoolers who may be falling behind — to teach them

what skills are needed, what employers are looking for and how not to make mistakes now.

"Pave the path, do the reverse mapping. If you want to be a carpenter, pay attention to your

math lessons now."

To cap the undertaking, Centennial educator Holly Smith asked the students to jot down their reflections from the day spent at the center.

"One of the many

things I learned is to have confidence in yourself during a job interview," wrote Shaynee Cruz. "If you're not confident, your interviewer

SEE PROGRAM, 7A

PROGRAM/ from page 5A

can see right through you."

As a student, Justin Cruz now realizes that his responsibility "is to be on time, to act mature, to be respectful and to follow all instructions and directions."

The students weren't the only ones impressed with the call center visit.

"This was an incredible experience for our students," wrote counselor Melissa Soward. "I believe they've gained useful information they will be able to take with them in the future.

"All of the activities served a purpose in the AT&T mission, as well as the professional responsibilities and ethics that are critical in any career."
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