

CONNECTING YOUNG PEOPLE AND CAREERS

# On path to a better life

*For Kensington man, free training program has opened the doors.*

By Kristen A. Graham  
 STAFF WRITER

Isaiah Gonzalez was the smart one, the one who was supposed to make it out of Kensington in a cap and gown, headed for college and better things.

He did well in classes, graduating from his public high school with five acceptance letters to colleges and universities, but as it is for so many Philadelphians, higher education remained beyond his grasp. Financial aid forms were tough to navigate, and at the end of the day, even with aid, the price was too steep.

While 67 percent of all Philadelphia School District students graduate from high school in four years, just 27 percent of all city residents hold bachelor's degrees, according to the Pew Charitable Trusts — lower than the national average. For some, college isn't the right path. And for many, life just gets in the way.

Gonzalez always dreamed of giving his family something to be proud about. See **GONZALEZ** on A8

Two of his older brothers were locked up on murder charges and are serving long prison sentences.

College wasn't an option for him, but he wanted to help pay his family's bills after graduation. He found work clerking in a sneakers store, driving shuttle vans for an airport hotel. Some people in the neighborhood told him those were good jobs, but he thought differently.

"I thought, 'How did I get here? I should be in college.' I just felt stuck," said Gonzalez, who graduated from Kensington Health Sciences Academy in 2016.

Earlier this year, he got a call that changed his life. Gonzalez's old high school counselor had heard about a pilot program administered by nonprof-

it social service agency **JEVS Human Services** and aimed at transitioning hard-working students into the real world. The program, three months of classroom training followed by an externship, guaranteed successful students from Kensington Health Sciences Academy and YouthBuild Charter School jobs in the Einstein Healthcare System.

The training did not cost the students a dime. The program costs \$13,500 to administer, with funds coming from Einstein and the Lenfest Foundation (whose founder is billionaire philanthropist H.F. "Gerry" Lenfest, who owned the Inquirer, Daily News and Philly.com before donating it to a journalism nonprofit).

"This is a career, something you can build your life out of," said Gonzalez, 20. "In our neighborhood, there is nothing but financial instability, and this means financial stability."

Things could easily have gone another way for him. He comes from a close-knit, protective family — his mother works for their church and his father is a truck driver — but that guarantees little in his neighborhood, Gonzalez learned.

Growing up as the youngest of five kids, Gonzalez liked to play football and baseball, and thought about becoming a doctor. But mostly, he liked to be with his two big brothers, whom he idolized.

He was 12 when his oldest brother was arrested on murder charges after turning to drugs to make money. Fifteen months later, another brother was booked for a separate murder. Neither

are likely to be free for decades, at least.

"It tore my parents up," said Gonzalez. It tore him up, too — walking past their empty room felt awful; getting a good grade or making a play at a football game didn't feel the same, either. "A lot of people think broken families are only if you don't have a mom and a dad, but everyone has a story and struggles to overcome."

During that dark time, his mother, Angelina Gonzalez, said she tried to kill herself.

"We raised our children in Kensington, and we've always taught them right from wrong, but they've seen different things, hard things," Angelina Gonzalez said. "Isaiah said, 'Mommy, I promise you I won't do the things my brothers did. I'm going to be a good boy.'"

Mentors at his church eventually helped him regain his footing — young men who played sports with Gonzalez, talked to him about life, gave him a place to vent and a way to reconnect. He was an eager student in high school, recalls James Williams, the former principal of Kensington Health Sciences. Everyone had high hopes for him.

But the Einstein opportunity divided his life into before and after, Gonzalez said. Classes were intense, but his cohort grew close, pooling money to buy group breakfasts, rotating houses for study groups. Eighteen started the program; 14 graduated and 13 qualified to place into jobs as patient-services representatives, the first people patients interact with when they walk in the door of an Ein-



stein practice.

Alia Sutton-Bey, a [JEVS](#) youth services support coordinator, was wowed by Gonzalez the moment she met him — he was professional and polite, “the ultimate charmer — personable, helpful. His personality is almost infectious.”

A month into his new job at a large Einstein practice in Mayfair, Gonzalez has already earned high praise from Christopher Scaven, the medical director of Einstein Community Healthcare Associates.

“He’s our shining star,” said Scaven, who said the health system benefits from investing in people from the communities it serves. “I’ve gotten good feedback from patients about Isaiah — they say he’s friendly, welcoming. He’s always very pleasant to deal with, and he has a good work attitude and ethic.”

Einstein offers tuition benefits, and Gonzalez plans on taking advantage of them — a bachelor’s in biology, he thinks, then a master’s and some kind of clinical career.

So far, he likes the work, the crisp khakis and scrub shirt he wears, the challenge and rewards of interacting with the public. His brothers, whom he sees and writes to as often as his schedule permits, say he inspires them, they’ve told Gonzalez.

“There can be hard days, but

people might be really sick or going through something tough, and you can put a smile on a patient’s face,” said Gonzalez of his job. “I think you just have to find the joy in that, have a love for people.”

There’s also the added bonus of showing the young men he now mentors through his church an alternative to the narratives all around them, people living the street life or working jobs with little upward mobility.

“When I got this job, people said, ‘Oh, that’s great, you’re making more money,’ but it’s about more than that,” Gonzalez said. “My mentors always got me out of the neighborhood, and I want to do that for these kids, too. I’m trying to be the best man possible.”

Angelina Gonzalez is cooking a big feast for her family on Thanksgiving, even though it’s her birthday. She doesn’t mind, she said. She loves to keep them close, especially the baby, the one whom teachers used to tell her was always the last one to turn his test papers in, because he was forever double-checking things, making sure he had everything right.

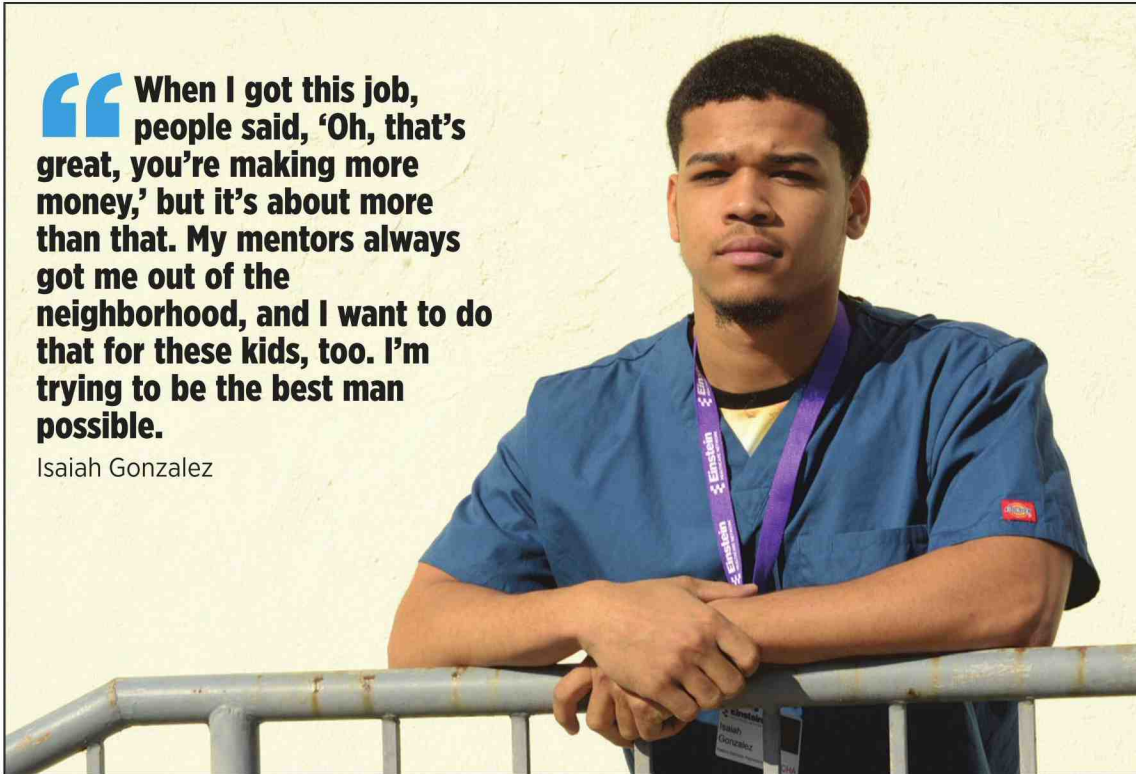
“The sky’s the limit for him,” she said. “A door was opened for him, and he’s just soaring.”

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Isaiah Gonzalez



Isaiah Gonzalez got a boost through nonprofit’s program. JAMES MOSLEY



**Isaiah Gonzalez with Christopher Scaven**, medical director of Einstein Community Healthcare Associates. "He's our shining star," Scaven said of Gonzalez, who was trained through a pilot program administered by [JEVS Human Services](#). JAMES MOSLEY