

PROGRAM: Project WOW

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Gabriel Ramos takes apart a computer as part of his IT training with Project WOW. Photo: Nigel Thompson/AL DÍA News

A second chance for Philadelphia's dropouts

For 15 years, JEVS' Project WOW has been giving Philadelphia dropouts the skills they need to enter the professional world and turn a new page in their lives.

By [Nigel Thompson](#) - February 18, 2019

Nowadays, Gabriel Ramos is very honest with himself when looking back at his early days in the Project WOW program at JEVS' Orleans Technical College. At the time, he was still overwhelmed by the prospect of providing for a family while living check-to-check and pursuing an education.

“At first, I’m not going to deny it, I’m not that strong at will,” said Ramos. “I felt beat. I felt depressed. I’m thinking, ‘How am I going to make it through the month? How am I going to make it through the day?’”

Enter Project WOW, a free GED preparation and work training program for high school dropouts in Philadelphia ages 18 to 24. Participants get hands-on training in a multitude of building trades such as plumbing, electrical, carpentry and weatherization, in addition to information technology. They also receive job coaching services, including resume workshops and mock interviews, and have the opportunity to study and test for their GED.

For Ramos, it was the door to a life beyond worrying when the next paycheck arrives.

“Before here it was just working, home, working, home, just trying to maintain. That’s no way to live,” he said.

Ramos left school in the 11th grade to work and provide for his then-infant son and longtime girlfriend. He started with unloading trucks, but found his passion on the few days he helped his brother with electrical work. Ramos’ brother, who had graduated from Orleans Technical, noticed Gabriel’s natural skill, and suggested he sign up for classes at Orleans to see how far he could take his passion.

“He was like: ‘You have a knack for this, let’s see how far you can go,’” said Ramos of his brother’s influence.

After a phone call to the school, Ramos found out about Project WOW and enrolled in its information technology program — just missing the sign-up deadline for the property management program. While Ramos was still navigating many responsibilities in his personal life, including sending his son to live with his family in Puerto Rico while he began studying, he was encouraged by the attentiveness of the faculty to his situation.

“The staff doesn’t see you as a number,” said Ramos. “They see you as the seed that can become the tree.”

The integration process at Project WOW is designed as a personalized experience that allows the staff to pinpoint a student’s interests and put together the best plan for them to follow towards their success. For example, Ramos’ initial interest in the electrical field gave him the opportunity to come in early and observe the property management class. He has also taken a ‘paternity leave’ to witness the birth of his daughter: a transformative life experience in which he was also supported, in a way, by Project WOW, as a staff member supported him and talked him through the process while his daughter was being born.

That staff member was JEVS’ youth coordinator, Sylvia Ocasio, who lives by the principle of seeing potential in every student.

“For me, it’s just a way of life and I can’t think of myself without it,” said Ocasio.

Dubbed ‘Mother Teresa’ by Ramos and other staff members, Ocasio has worked for JEVS for 25 years, and been involved with Project WOW since its inception 15 years ago. Back then, the program only served two or three students at a time; now, it enrolls 54 students from across Philadelphia.

“It has allowed me the opportunity to meet some amazing, wonderful young people in Philadelphia that no one knew how great they really were until they got here,” she said.

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Ocasio was raised in the same neighborhoods where most of the students live today and confronted hardship and violence — her father was murdered when she was nine years old. It's an all-too-common experience among the student body, but sharing these stories with one another, Ocasio said, cultivates an environment catered to the students' success.

"They talk about the struggles of life," said Ocasio. "When they came here, the first or second day we talked about a safe space, and within this safe space they can come in and be productive."

In the end, Ocasio has found that most young people coming to the program just need that connection to succeed.

"If you can have the compassion, the love and support they need, this works," she said.

For Ramos, overcoming the initial fear was the first and most important step.

"Take a chance, you never know what might happen if you don't take that leap," he said.

Since taking that jump, Ramos is now only a couple tests away from getting his GED and graduating from the program. Project WOW will continue to support him in finding employment beyond his graduation. While he says that, for now, the side jobs are still necessary to make ends meet, he hopes to one day own his own electrical company.

For Ocasio, who turns 60 soon, her goal is to continue to give all she has for the students that come through Project WOW.

"No matter where you come from, or what you've been through, you can still make it here. You matter," she said.

Project WOW is currently looking for eight more students for its upcoming IT program, which begins on Mar. 4. For more details, visit its website [here](#).



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