

PROGRAM: Project WOW

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By Claudia Salvato, THE NORTHEAST TIMES

In a bright, window-lit office at Orleans Technical College, a young man chats with a woman sitting at her desk. They laugh like family would among an air of unspoken understanding that comes only with a history, her with a knowing, mothering chuckle, and him with a newly confident, fresh playfulness.

That morning, the young man woke up and took the bus in, as his car was totaled recently when a truck rear-ended him. But he knows he need not worry about how to get home – the folks at JEVS are looking out.

The young man, Oshy Gonzalez-Perez, is set to graduate from Project WOW this January. Since the summer, he has been coming to Orleans Technical College for classes in pursuit of his high school diploma. It's there he met Sylvia Ocasio, the project manager of JEVS Project WOW.

“We primarily provide training to young adults ages 18-24 that are high school dropouts,” Ocasio said.

“Here they have an opportunity to obtain a Penn Foster High School diploma. It allows people who didn't do well in traditional education, they come here and we have training in the classrooms and small groups,” she said.

At 16, Gonzalez was kicked out of his foster home and became homeless. His family threw away his uniforms, and without proper attire or a place to stay, Gonzalez dropped out of high school.

He fended for himself until the birth of his son, when he started fending for two. Gonzalez said he worked several entry-level jobs, and it was difficult to focus on education. He attempted to

both return to high school and enter programs for help, but between working and childcare responsibilities, it was unmanageable.

“Attempting multiple times to go for my education, I lost faith, I lost motivation, and I sort of gave up on a high school diploma,” Gonzalez said.

For Gonzalez, and many others who enter Project WOW, dropping out of high school is not an isolated event.

Gonzalez was born in Puerto Rico and moved to the U.S. when he was 2 years old. His biological mother struggled with substance abuse and was periodically incarcerated, which led to Gonzalez entering foster care in North Philadelphia. In 2019, she passed away.

“My childhood was so traumatic for me,” Gonzalez said. “I got abused, I was in the streets falling victim to my circumstances. It was really, really hard. I felt like I was forced to mature at a young age.”

The goal of Project WOW is to serve these Philadelphians. The completely free program provides hands-on trade training at the technical college, support in getting a diploma and job placement assistance.

“I gave up on my diploma and that’s when I found out about JEVS. Being here, working with Ms. Sylvia, working with Mr. T ... I’ve learned so much,” Gonzalez said. “It’s blessed me in so many ways.”

In addition to education and training, Project WOW offers professional development. Terance Johnson, youth placement coach, says his role is to give participants the soft skills they need.

“My job is to introduce them to themselves,” Johnson said.

“They’re taking on a lot when they come. I always tell them you can be the best carpenter or the best electrician in the world, but if you don’t even know who you are or how to introduce yourself, or explain what you can and cannot do, well ... that’s the soft skills.”

In addition, Johnson works on realistic goal-setting, interviewing and exposing students to potential employers.

Ocasio said she believes students get a lot out of having a team who believes in them.

“I am relentless when it comes to them,” she said. “It’s my passion and my love. With some support they do amazingly well because they are intelligent young people and all they need is that support.”

This combination of dedicated staff and youth who are open to making a change is what makes Project WOW so successful. And beyond the diplomas, certifications and fruitful interviews, participants gain back feelings of confidence and capability.

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“Even now I still can’t believe I have my diploma,” Gonzalez said. “Even now I still can’t believe I’ve accomplished all this within 6 months. I know what I went through, I know how many times I’ve attempted, I know that I wanted to give up, and I’m like, ‘I did it.’ ”

Gonzalez is set to officially graduate from the program in January. Though his dedication took a hit at his bank account, as the time spent at Orleans Tech was time he could have spent working for money, and even though his car recently got totaled through no fault of his own, Gonzalez says he is happy.

“Trust the process and never rush your process,” he said. “And do not take anything for granted. Any aspect. Not people, not your situation, and I mean that in the most humble way. Ego and pride that block the blessings. The last thing I learned from this program is to be grateful for the little things, because without being grateful for the little things, you can never be grateful for the big things.”