

Student: 'Because I had a job, I'm what I am now'

By Stephen Franklin
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

Second of two articles on how job-training programs can give states, firms and workers a winning edge.

One-time high school dropout Bernard Mason is proof the government can at least help save some lives.

While fighting to get back on his feet, living alone and attending an alternative high school in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood, Mason scraped by on money earned from a government-sponsored part-time job.

He eventually graduated from 60-student Prologue High School with high test scores, and today the soft-spoken 20-year-old is a junior at Shaw University in North Carolina.

"Because I had a job, I'm what I am

now," he said.

After years of complaints that its job-training programs have ignored youngsters and adults such as Mason, the federal government recently enacted changes designed to help the more needy combat career obstacles.

Predicting a "tremendous impact" from the changes, Herb Dennis, head of job training for the Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs, said job programs "will be more targeted toward the disadvantaged."

Under the changes, job-training programs have to put more emphasis on discovering workers' needs and gearing the programs to them.

But the changes, which took effect July 1, have brought a storm of controversy, budget headaches and program cuts. Some say the changes are too sweeping and rigid

for such a system.

"Hopefully, [job-training officials] will go slow so they don't crash as they change lanes," said Bill Leavy, director of the Greater West Town Community Development Program.

Longer training programs, as required by the changes, will hurt workers, who "need to put food on the table for their families," he said.

Others, however, say it is time the government stopped running short-term programs that benefit the most skilled but leave the most disadvantaged stuck in low-wage jobs or no jobs.

With more emphasis on workers' needs, not on the openings at job-training programs, they say there should be better decision-making about whether a worker would most benefit from short- or long-

SEE TRAINING, PAGE 2

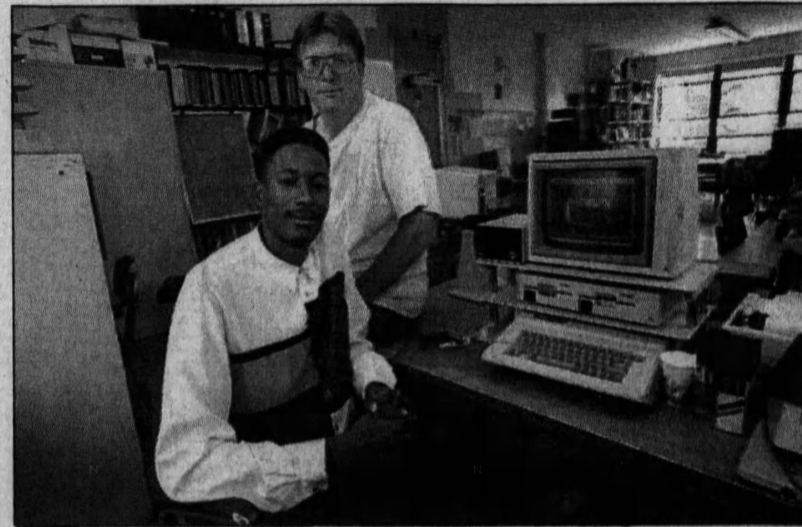


Photo for the Tribune by Tim Boyle

Bernard Mason (left) is going to college, after graduating from Prologue High School in Chicago, where Dale Russell (right) is a job-coordinator.

Training

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

term training.

"It is no longer a slot-driven system," said Carol Swinney, an official with the mayor's Office of Employment and Training in Chicago.

While the theory is widely extolled, the impact of the changes is that job-training funds will pay for longer programs to train fewer workers, explain state and local officials.

"You are probably doubling the existing costs per participant," said Swinney.

Without more federal support, major cuts are under way for some city programs, including the one that helped Bernard Mason.

Such cuts are especially damaging to Chicago's summer and year-round job-training programs, which serve about 30,000 people—only about 5 percent of those eligible, say city officials.

Mary Gonzalez Koenig, director of the city's job-training office, predicts that many job-training programs in Chicago will be forced to find private sponsors and new contracts to survive.

City officials say they have cut their support for programs for disadvantaged and displaced workers by up to 25 percent and for youths by up to 37 percent for the current year.

The federal government's \$40 million support for the city's job-training efforts, not including still unappropriated additional funds for summer jobs programs, is down about 19 percent from last year, say state officials.

Overall, the state expects about \$143 million from the federal government, a 9 percent decline from last year, according to state officials.

Chicago lost some of its job-training funding, said Dennis, because unemployment grew in the last year across the state and funds had to be diverted to other communities.

In addition, Chicago officials say they had to trim their support for local agencies because of federal changes that restrict the way they allocate funds and new limitations on spending for youth programs.

But Jack Wuest, director of the Alternative Schools Network, which channels job-training

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money to schools in Chicago such as Prologue, the one Bernard Mason attended, is angry and impatient with any rationale for the cuts.

"It's a disgrace," said Wuest, who has begun to lay off employees. "We do precisely the work that all of the research points toward, and this happens. There is no reason to this."

Government-sponsored jobs, said Principal Nancy Jackson, have meant new shoes, new jackets, transportation money and food for students at Prologue, a third-floor walkup in a time-worn Lawrence Avenue building.

They have meant a sense of pride for youngsters, said Kathy Blair, a job developer at Prologue, who has seen the program shrink over the years.

Last year, she helped 18 youngsters find government-sponsored part-time jobs, compared with 28 youths in previous years.

Despite a 45 percent cut in its job-training funds last year, Jackson said, the school has struggled to keep up the program. "We don't have the money to do it," she said. "But we are doing it through prayer and faith."

Black teens find fewer jobs available

By Stephen Franklin

Almost daily Chiquita Collins recites a little speech that has become her pillar of strength, and it boils down to this:

"I want to work. I want to better myself. I want to go to school. I don't want to be a teenage statistic. I don't care what people say. It's how you feel about yourself."

As she searches for work this summer, the cheerful, outgoing 18-year-old public aid recipient, who lives with her 2-year-old son in a

North Side Chicago neighborhood, will have to draw heavily on her determination.

So, too, will thousands of other black teenagers.

They are facing the worst job crisis in recent years for black teens. It's a case of fewer jobs in the nation's poverty-afflicted big city neighborhoods, fewer teens at work and, worse yet, fewer looking for work.

What's most troubling, experts say, is that the problem appears to be one point on a long downward

slide that began in the 1970s and threatens to disconnect countless black teens from a lifetime pattern of stable jobs.

"There is something broken in the development and adult transition of black youths," said Ron Mincy, an economist with the Urban Institute, a research center in Washington, D.C.

Unemployment among black teens ages 16 to 19 soared to nearly 47 percent in April, the highest for that month since 1983. It was

See Jobless, pg. 10

From Page 1

Jobless

Continued from page 1

ready allocated. The plan made it through the House last week, but "it is absolutely not an easy pass in the Senate," said Mary De Gonia, a Washington lobbyist for civil rights and non-profit organizations.

"People don't seem to care," she said. "They don't seem to realize that this [summer jobs program] is the largest single employer of African-American youths in the country."

The House version also set aside \$80 million from the \$320 million for a year-round effort called Youth Opportunities Unlimited, which targets specific communities and programs.

Without the extra funds, Chicago will go from 24,000 summer jobs last year to 14,000 positions for youngsters this summer. Last year, the city received about \$28 million, compared with \$14.8 million this year, city officials say.

If Congress passes the administration's current summer jobs proposal, the city could receive another \$5 million, say Chicago officials.

So far, about 12,000 youths have signed up for the program, which allocates minimum-wage jobs on a first-come, first-served basis, said Carol Swinney, first deputy director of the Mayor's Office on Employment and Training.

It is not clear if these jobs, which some critics deride as short-term "fire insurance," make a real difference for black teenagers.

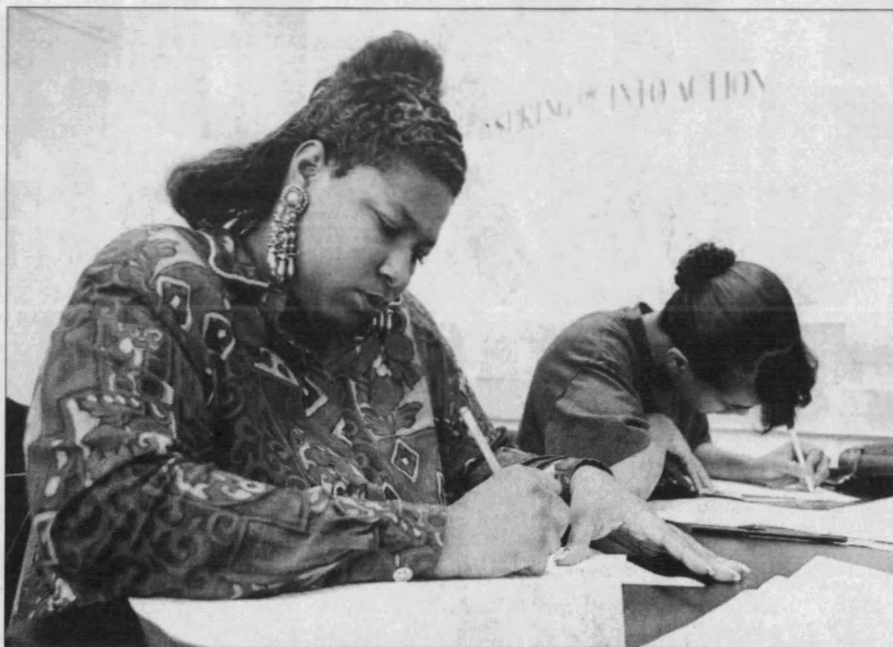
"There is no study that points to the short or long-term effect of summer jobs," said Mincy of the Urban Institute.

University of Pennsylvania sociologist Elijah Anderson agrees that summer jobs have a "marginal impact" on black teens' long-term job problems.

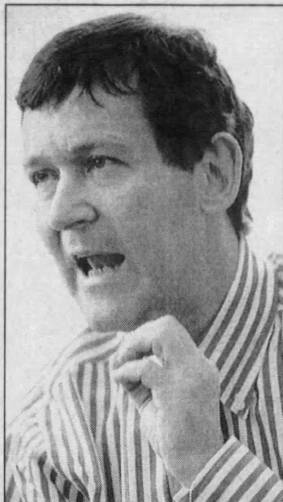
Still, Anderson, author of a recent study of black teens in Philadelphia called "Streetwise," says federally sponsored summer jobs have other results.

The jobs become alternatives to just hanging out, which is what a lot of job market dropouts do, to working in the underground economy and to crime, he says. Equally important, Anderson says, the jobs offer a new dose of hope for the black community.

"You get a lot of kids who start selling drugs at 14 and 15 years old, and who start out as drug runners and lookouts. A summer jobs program would really compete with those jobs in the under-



Chiquita Collins, 18, works on a resume at the Loop office of Jobs For Youth. "I want to work. I want to be involved. I want to have that professional feeling," she said.



Jack Connelly, Jobs For Youth director, says summer jobs matter for youths' career paths.

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But at Jobs For Youth, the Chi-

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cago agency where Chiquita Collins recently sought help and started classes on resume writing, agency director Jack Connelly has no doubt that summer jobs matter for youths' career paths.

"It is much easier for a kid to get a job if he's had a job experience. And this work experience is in lieu of anything else," said Connelly, whose agency finds work for its youngsters with 250 Chicago-area firms.

Finding a job is especially critical for someone like Greg Blackman, 20, who has spent the last year vainly searching for one. Before he signed up recently at the Jobs For Youth program, he was convinced there was nowhere to turn.

Now, he has hope of finding work, but he doesn't set his expectations high. "All I can go by is what's happened in the past," he said. "It's been like this and it will be like this for some time to come."

He's wrong. About the past, at

least.

Before the 1970s, black teens' job problems were not as severe, experts say. Then changes took place for the U.S. economy, for cities, for the jobs available for black workers in the cities and for the black community.

The changes were so powerful and pervasive they have bedeviled black workers ever since, experts say.

To begin, blacks increasingly have found themselves isolated in central cities away from where the nation's job growth has been taking place.

By 1992, 55 percent of all blacks were living in central cities, compared with 26 percent of whites, according to government statistics.

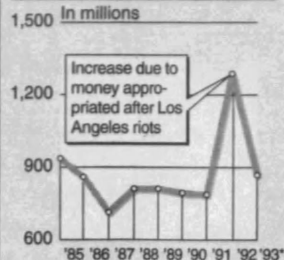
Young black workers could no longer step up to their parents' blue-collar jobs. The jobs had vanished, moved to the suburbs or gone overseas.

In the Northeastern and Midwest cities with the highest loss rate of factory work, the jobless

Fewer summer jobs for black teens

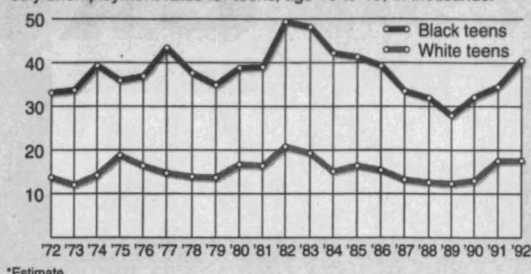
With federal funding for summer job programs decreasing, teen unemployment rates are increasing. However, they are increasing disproportionately for black teens, who have historically had higher unemployment rates than white teens.

Funding for job programs



Unemployment rates among black and white teens

July unemployment rates for teens, age 16 to 19, in thousands.



*Estimate

Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics, news reports

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rate between 1983 and 1987 for 20-year-old black males not in school was 42 percent, according to Barry Bluestone, an economist and labor expert at the University of Massachusetts at Boston.

At the same time, the jobless rate among black workers in Southern and Southwest cities was 17 percent, Bluestone notes.

Then came the collision between black teens' schooling problems and the declining demand for low-skill jobs.

Young black workers with limited educations today find far fewer jobs open to them, and the pay is quite low for those they do find, says Harry Holzer, an economist at Michigan State University.

"As the wages decline, they [young black workers] are just less interested in work," said Holzer. And so they search for jobs where the pay is off the books or for quick, fast illegal jobs, he said.

These youngsters account for a large number of the black teens who are phantoms as far as the legal job market is concerned. They are phantoms because it is not exactly clear what happens to them.

Three out of four of these job market dropouts in 1992 were not in school, more than three times the rate for white teenagers, ac-

cording to government statistics. This joblessness spreads from the teenage to young adult years.

One-third of all black males ages 20 to 29 who didn't finish high school did not hold any job in 1990, according to Andy Sum, an economist at Northeastern University in Boston.

The comparative figure for whites and Hispanics was 1 out of 10.

Such gloomy statistics are on Chiquita Collins' mind because she fears she is already one: a young, black unwed mother who finished school with a general equivalency diploma and who lives on welfare.

She equally worries that she will be lumped with those black teens who have quit their job searches and simply do nothing.

But her work experience is minimal: six months recently at a small downtown Chicago concession stand.

"I want to work. I want to be involved. I want to have that professional feeling," she said last week with a gleam in her eye. "That's important to me because a lot of people think I gave up."

All she needs now is what so few like her have: a job.