Reach for ‘Hired’ Ground

One of our local high school students, Sal was hired at our Haverstraw King’s Daughters Library to be a page having received a staff referral. When I asked him before summer vacation what his job plans were, his response was, “I want to work for the local taxi service.” When questioned what would he do there as he was only 15 and didn’t have a driver’s license, he replied, “my friend was trying to work there and I thought I could go along.” Further discussion ensued regarding his options, none of which were feasible. It was clear that Sal didn’t have a realistic view of the job process and how difficult it is to present oneself in a positive light in the fierce competition for a limited number of jobs.

Among his peers, Sal is not unique. His situation is made more difficult because he comes from an area where cultural and language factors place him at a further disadvantage. Hispanics are the most prevalent race comprising over 67% of the total population of our second library in the Village of Haverstraw. Additional conversations ensued with other teens and I realized that very little or no help was given to high schoolers to prepare for a job search. Thus the program, Reach for ‘Hired’ Ground was born.

With an RCLS Outreach grant of $1000 I was able to purchase a video camera, tripod and several books for the students. With an additional community grant from the Affinity Credit Union Foundation, a local credit union, I was able to offer a stipend to another person skilled at writing resumes and other job marketing skills. This program was targeted to our library’s high school juniors and seniors, many of them low-income. The workshop would take place in the fall, when students are making college plans and thinking about future career majors. Their resumes and interview skills would work for college applications as well as in a job search.

The publicity drive began at the high school. I reached out to the high school principal, the head guidance counselor and the business academy teacher the first week of school. I wrote a blurb about the program that the principal was then able to include in his welcoming email to the parents. The following week, I set up a table at the high school at the Meet the Teacher night and several parents and students stopped by. I blanketed both of our libraries and the local high school with flyers in both English and Spanish.

Five North Rockland High School students began the program of five weekly two hour classes on September 25th and graduated in the final class on October 30th.

The first class focused on what would be their ideal job. To begin, I spoke to them about my career trajectory which began with attending a SUNY school, but included several breaks of travel and various jobs. My first career was in journalism, quite a different path than I had intended to pursue with my college major of sociology. Gittel, the assistant teacher, spoke about her career path which included an undergraduate degree and then a detour from graduate school which included marriage and a new baby. She then also went on to a career in journalism, not the English teacher she had originally intended to be.

This was simply to show that as we grow older and learn more about ourselves and the world around us, our goals change. These students at this age do not have to be frightened of not knowing what they want to do with the ‘rest of your life’. To aid the students in targeting an initial goal I had the students take two aptitude tests. The first was “The Party” a Discovery exercise taken from the book, What Color is Your Parachute? for teens, by Carol Christen. It divides teens’ interests and skills into personality types. Finding a dream job “involves more than discovering what you love to do; it involves finding the people
you enjoy working with.” Who you pick to hang out with at the Party determines your Holland Code. Your choice of vocation is an expression of your personality.

Following ‘The Party’ exercise, students used the Brainfuse JobNow from the database on our library’s website. They took the Jung Typology self-assessment personality test based on Carl Jung’s and Isabel Briggs Myers’ personality type theory. They obtained a 4-letter type formula that described their strengths and preferences and the description of their personality type. This was another fun exercise where the students were able to identify careers and jobs that suited their personalities. One student was matched to a municipal planner. He had no idea what that was and was surprised that something like that existed. For all the students, some of the careers were mind-boggling as they were totally unknown. This met my purpose which was to demonstrate that there was so much out there in life and as you grow you will discover so many options that become available. They were each able to go on our library’s website and find the different tests they could take, and how they obtain a complete profile. I steered them towards www.bls.gov/ooh/, which is on the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics website, which enables you to look up a job and find out what is that job’s average salary, what education you need, and what kind of opportunities are available.

At the end of the class, I gave each teen a copy of The Alchemist, by Paulo Coelho. I chose this book because it is an allegory about the wisdom of listening to our hearts, recognizing opportunity and following our dreams. It was a book that told a story I thought all the students could all relate to. I think they were surprised and thrilled that they got such a lovely book with no pressure to read it or report on it. Each of the students left feeling very happy about the class! They did not expect it to be fun.

For the second session, we returned to the Brainfuse JobNow database and each student used the chronological resume template found there to create a resume. The teachers spoke about the language of resumes and how to create and configure ones’ experience in the best way towards obtaining the job you want. One student whose job last summer had been “park worker” became a Park Attendant with four job functions: 1. Helped maintain the park grounds 2. Handled traffic flow during major events 3. Assisted park attendees and 4. Organized and cleaned pool deck area and bathrooms. Each student completed their resumes during that session.

The third class included creating a cover letter to fill in the gaps of the resume. The letter allows for a personality to emerge and can be targeted to a specific job. I had each student write a letter for the first job they want to get in the summer or after school. They were read aloud and discussed.

I had the students prepare for the fourth session by dressing as they would appear at a job interview. We had discussed the do’s and don’ts at the previous session. Each student came to the class in lovely job interview attire! A staffer from the local Affinity Credit Union which had awarded us a grant, came and conducted the interviews. I had sent the staff person, Victoria, each student’s resume and cover letter beforehand so she was familiar with each student’s job application. The interviews were filmed using a video camera and tripod purchased with the monies received from the Outreach grant. While each student was being interviewed, the other students wrote their thank you notes for the job interviewer. This is where they get to put in everything they forgot to say at the interview because they were so nervous. And they thank the boss for the interview. The interviews were from seven to ten minutes long and included a discussion at the end.

The final class was a graduation ceremony whereby each student was given a portfolio replete with their resume, cover letter, pen and flash drive of their interview included within. I had each teen fill out an
evaluation. They all enjoyed the classes and felt they learned a lot. Only one student had ever done a resume in his business class. No one had spoken to a school guidance counselor so they felt they had truly benefited from having a forum to ask questions and learn the entire process. Though it took each one of them awhile to dare to look at their individual video interviews, they loved them!

Based on the reviews and my discussions with the students over the course of the five weeks, I plan to expand the program and make it an annual fall workshop. I would like to have additional workshops that might include financial literacy, i.e. opening a bank account, your first pay check, getting a credit card. Another session would include a panel of local private and state 4-year and 2-year colleges. These last sessions would be open to the parents of the students as well as the public. They would be advertised on the library’s website, the local Community Center, as well as the high school website.

Gauging from the anonymous evaluations, the program was a success. Public high schools rarely offer any classes in job seeking skills, so it is a terrific opportunity for libraries to step up and fill the void. Most libraries have staffers that are proficient in writing resumes or they could hire the private ‘tutors’ that are hired by individual parents.