

Top News
<i>The Rotarian</i> >
RVM: The Rotarian Video Magazine
Photo Essays
Press Center
Download <i>Rotary World</i> and Other Publications
Advertising Information
Classifieds

Down to business

At-risk teens get ready for work

By Nina Mandell
Special to *The Rotarian*
Photo by Alyce Henson/RI

December 2006

 [E-mail this story](#)

 [Printable version](#)



Job1 intern Evelyn Guzman gets on-the-job training from immigration attorney Don Garner.

[More from *The Rotarian*](#)

Read more articles from the latest issue of *The Rotarian*

It's 2 p.m. on a perfect Friday afternoon in August, and just about everyone in this downtown Chicago office building has cleared out. But luckily for immigration lawyer Don Garner, his new employee is still toiling away. Travel up five flights in the historic Chicago Athletic Association building, walk along the 1970s-style running track, and you'll find Evelyn Guzman at her desk, oblivious to the fact that she's supposed to be a distracted teenager getting ready for the weekend.

"I'm working on this one section of the Web site,"

Guzman, 18, says as she tilts the computer screen to show the pages she's been translating into Spanish all summer. "It's really good, because sometimes I have to look up words that I don't really remember."

Guzman, a native Spanish speaker, emigrated from Mexico when she was 11. She's a participant in Job1, a Rotary Club of Chicago program that sends 100 at-risk teens, selected by their high school teachers, to summer jobs at places like Columbia College, Exelon, and the Field Museum. At work, they learn valuable skills, network with influential professionals, and get an inside look at how businesses operate. Now in its second year, the program matches each teen in February with a Rotarian adviser. In the spring, the students take three courses, designed by the Society of Human Resources Professionals and the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship. With names like *Can't We All Just Get Along?* and *Anatomy of a Business*, the courses cover office etiquette, ethics, the basics of running a business, and communication skills, including conflict resolution. This year, 75 teens made it through the training and received job offers from area businesses, which also assign an employee – sometimes a Rotarian – to supervise.

Advertisement



Doors to the real world

These are hardly typical teenage summer jobs. The employers are required to let the interns sit in on important meetings, shadow key decision makers, and otherwise fully participate in company business.

The first day of work this year also was unlike the usual intern orientation. For starters, the week began with a big breakfast downtown, covered by the major media. A few days later, Guzman was interviewed for the nightly news by television station WGN.

Garner says the program benefits employees and employers alike. "I always ask people, 'What's your most important job?'" says Garner, president of the Chicago club. "And that's to help the youth of today."

For Garner and other employers in the program, the term at risk seems like a misnomer for these young adults, who've amazed supervisors by showing up for work on time every day and by completing assignments that challenge longtime employees.

Just look at Guzman, he says. "I don't know exactly what it is, but I think it's the combination of some inner drive and the three training sessions."

Inner drive? She's just always had it, says her mother, Elicenda, a homemaker who says she moved here from a ranch in Mexico to give her five children the opportunities she never had while growing up.

"She knows two languages, and she wants to study something," she says, with her daughter acting as interpreter. "When you live on a ranch, you don't have a chance to do things like that."

Guzman, who will continue to work part time for Garner while attending Columbia College after the program ends, says she's learned much beyond her basic responsibilities. She now knows more about how to navigate immigration law and what to look for in a lawyer — an important skill in her predominantly Hispanic neighborhood, where tales of people getting ignored or overcharged by their lawyers are commonplace, she says. "Your cousin," her mother interjects. "He had to pay a very expensive fee for a notary."

She's also had the opportunity to meet high-ranking people, including the Mexican ambassador. Gazing at her daughter with pride, her mother says, "It's everything I ever wanted for her."

Guzman's first days in the corporate world were challenging, however. "At first, she was always so scared to answer the phone," Garner says. "I used to call her just to test her. Now she's getting much more confident."

"I would get calls from people who were angry and spoke in heavy accents, so I couldn't understand them well," Guzman recalls. "Then I learned to take a note or pass the phone. And they were happy."

Companies also stand to reap economic benefits from the program, Garner notes. The marketable skills of teens like Guzman are often overlooked.

"This has been a great experience for our law firm," Garner says. He plans to track Guzman's successes through college and graduation.

Grace under fire

Just a few blocks away, in one of those office buildings that's nice enough to have two separate elevator banks, is another Job1 success story. Her name is Jennifer Hill, and as soon as she's done with her job at CBIZ, a corporate insurance firm, she's headed to North Carolina A&T State University on a full scholarship from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. She'll be the first one in her family to go to a four-year college, where she plans to study agricultural insurance.

A middle child with working parents, Hill somehow got used to chaos growing up, she says. That made it easy for her to adapt to the hectic work environment at CBIZ, where her boss, Lisa Russ, a member of the Rotary Club of Chicago, began calling her "Buddha" because of her ability to deal with anything people throw at her.

"There are a lot of fires that pop up in this office," says Don Harper, a senior account manager who works with Hill. "It's nice to have someone like Jen around to help put them out. Last week, she discovered a major problem with a Blue Cross Blue Shield account that would have taken us another week and been a huge issue."

Hill — who jokes that she listens to the radio to drown out her manager's constant yelling — has spent her summer updating the busy company's client database and making follow-up calls. The economic benefit to CBIZ far outweighs the \$10 an hour paid to Hill, Russ says. "I told my staff, 'When Jen's gone, you're going to have your noses out of joint because of how much she does around here,'" she adds.

About 60 of the program's original 100 students successfully completed their internships, which is considered an admirable rate of attrition for a program geared to at-risk teens, especially a relatively new one. Says Andrea Thomalla, Job1 coordinator: "Many employers had such a positive experience that they have not only expressed an interest in participating in the program again next year but in rehiring the same student."

[View a related video from *Rotary International Interactive*.](#)

[This article originally appeared in the December 2006 issue of *The Rotarian*.](#)

return to [top](#)