

There was a lot to be proud of, and maybe even more than a few surprises, at the recent Youth Career Expos.

By Laura Byrnes, APR, CPRC



To begin with, the events demonstrated once again what can be achieved when public/private partners work together.

In this case, the partners were the Ocala/Marion County Chamber & Economic Partnership, Public Education Foundation of Marion County, Marion County Public Schools, Mid-Florida Regional Manufacturers Association and CareerSource Citrus Levy Marion. The events were sponsored by HDG Hotel Development & Management Group.

“This is just an incredible, hands-on opportunity for young people to get face-to-face with a variety of businesses and business people,” said Tom James, the CEP’s director of networking.

Nearly 1,000 middle and high school students, identified and invited by their schools, took part in the expos. They rotated among three sessions: career fair with employers, roundtable discussions with industry leaders and a soft skills workshop.

The first expo, held January 12 for middle schoolers, included 26 employers, 21 industry leaders and 120 volunteers. The second event on February 2 for high school students, featured 46 employers, 36 industry leaders and 135 volunteers.

Everything went off without a hitch and without incident. And many of the students showed up dressed to impress, prepared with good questions and ready to take notes.

Lisa Lombardo, chief people and culture officer for HDG, said her company was eager to sponsor the events because it sees “a lot of potential in this generation.”

“We don’t buy into the whole ‘this generation just flits around and is non-committed,’” she said. “HDG realizes this generation wants to make a difference ... As a company we have a purpose that’s greater than profit and we believe this generation can live up to that.”

Lombardo said the Youth Career Expos were also a “great way to remind people that Marion County is a great community for starting and growing their career.”

People like Anna Tonnemacher, a 16-year-old junior at West Port High School.

“It shows you how many job opportunities you have in your own hometown and you don’t have to go very far to have a career in a large company,” Anna said.

Wait. What? When I was a teen, the last place I wanted to stay was the place I called home. I may not have known with certitude what I was going to do with my life, but I knew what I wasn’t going to do. (Turns out, of course, that I was wrong).

Happily Anna didn’t share that view.

“I personally think that staying home is comforting and it can be exciting to help out where you came from, to give back to the community that gave you so much,” she said.

Rachel Wolowitz, 17 and a senior, said that for her it’s all about staying close to her family because her family is close.



“This expo shows students that they can stay close to home, to your family, which can be a great support to you at the same time you’re trying to be independent.”

Tarun Koti, 14, of Howard Middle School, lost little time filling his notebook with insights gleaned during the roundtable discussions. Think “speed dating,” with eight students at a table, and representatives from manufacturing, technology, healthcare, logistics/transportation, and education and public service rotating from table to table.

“This was a good way to get a lot of information,” Tarun said. “I’m not sure what I want to be yet, but I’m getting some good ideas. It’s better to see what’s out there rather than say, ‘OMG what am I going to do?’”

Naomi Huitron, an 18-year-old senior at Marion Technical Institute, said, “I wish I had gone to something like this earlier.”

“It’s been awesome ... instead of hearing from others about the industry, you can hear from the people who work there.”

The opportunity is a two-way street, said Maria Tobon, Human Resources director for Raney’s Inc.

“For us to be able to talk to students, to tell them about our business, is just wonderful. And we can really relate; we were there not too long ago, and it can be confusing. What’s important for us is it’s not only about a paycheck, it’s important to go to work with a smile.”

Ultimately, “it’s important to get out of the classroom and get your feet wet,” the CEP’s James said, recalling his own experience in the challenge grant mentor program he participated in as a junior. He said that program allowed him to intern at TV 20 and Ocala Travel Service, and he also worked for the Ocala Star-Banner.

“Getting a feel for being around professionals, getting to understand what it takes on a day-to-day basis, I think is really important. It’s priceless, actually. It meant as much to me as anything,” James said. “Of course, you need a community that provides enough opportunity, and that’s what we’re all working on today.”

Here’s a comforting postscript in case you’d like to join the effort to provide training and career opportunities: plans are in the works for school-based employability workshops in preparation for a job fair later this spring for high school seniors.

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