

# Marion County Youth Career Expo: Community 'steps up, shows up' once again



By Laura Byrnes, APR, CPRC  
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You could call Jaekob Redish the "Soul Man," and he'd own it straight up.

That's because Jaekob, a 16-year-old sophomore at Vanguard High School, plans to be a culinary super star one day – along the lines of Ocala's own Food Channel standout Rashad Jones – that is, after he completes seminary school. The "soul," you see, is both the type of food Jaekob loves to cook and the spiritual nourishment he hopes to feed his flock once he earns his doctorate in theology.

"My grandma taught me to cook, it's my passion – frying, baking, grilling, you name it," Jaekob said. "But I've also got a higher calling."

Jaekob was one of more than 800 students – public, private and home-schooled – who took part in one of three Marion County Youth Career Expos on February 13 and 14. It was Jaekob's first expo, though the third year the event has been put on in partnership by CareerSource Citrus Levy Marion, Marion County Public Schools, the Public Education Foundation of Marion County, the Ocala/Marion County Chamber & Economic Partnership and the Mid-Florida Manufacturers Association. This year's expos were also sponsored by AT&T.

The expos bring together middle and high-school students interested in a hands-on look at career opportunities and business representatives interested in meeting and developing their future workforce.

Participants rotated through three distinct experiences: the "career fair," where we caught up with Jaekob and where participants visited area business' and education booths, roundtable discussions with industry leaders and a workshop on soft skills presented by world-renown motivational strategist Darrell "Coach D" Andrews.

While Jaekob had a clear career path in mind, starting at the College of Central Florida and eventually moving onto the Culinary Institute of Art, he said the expo showed him "there's more selection out there, so I know if culinary arts doesn't work out, which is Plan A, then there is a Plan B."

De'yunta Mathis, a Vanguard High School junior, is interested in a CIA of another kind – yes, that CIA – though he said he would also consider the FBI, after first serving in the US Navy.

The 17-year-old said the expo was "pretty cool" and something he was eager to attend. "We get to explore new careers and there are lots of careers here," he said. "I was thinking like I've got to leave Ocala to get a job."

Bingo. That is exactly the message that Judi Zanetti said she hopes students take away with them.

Zanetti, one of the event organizers and executive director of the Public Education Foundation, said, "Once again, our community has stepped up and showed up to share great opportunities with our students and that's what it's all about. Hopefully, we can encourage students to want to continue to live and work here in Marion County."

Brenda Chrisman, CareerSource CLM's business development officer, said that expo partners are working to develop career awareness among area youth, and help businesses build their talent pipeline.

"We want students to begin engaging with employers and learn what's available in Marion County, learn about the importance of soft skills and employers' expectations," Chrisman said. "Employers are looking for talent, and that's why they're here – it's a very tough market. We know that some students will go on to vocational school, some to college and some will walk out of high school and be able to learn on the job."

Chrisman said "it's a great partnership," noting that in addition to students, the event included 121 additional support between staff and businesses.

Dean Blinkhorn, the CEP's director of Talent Development, participated both as one of the planning partners and as a round table leader. He said the students he spoke with had wide-ranging interests, including one young lady who wants to be a welder, something she became interested in at Marion Technical Institute.

"The students are really well prepared with good questions, I am really impressed," he said. "The seniors particularly seem to already have a good idea what they want to do past graduation."

Daniella Sanders may not be a senior, but she definitely knows what she is going to do.

The 16-year-old sophomore plans to get into the medical profession. "I came (to the expo) with questions to pin point information that will benefit me and point me in the direction I want to go," she said.

And that direction will lead her to the ER as a nurse. Daniella, who plans to attend the University of Florida, comes by that interest honestly. At 10, she underwent surgery, and her sister's boyfriend assisted as the anesthesiologist.

"I find it exciting and always wanted to help people," she said.

Al Jones, AutoZone store manager and member of CareerSource CLM's board of directors, said he was also pleased.

"The students were very polite and engaging. The format for speaking with the students table by table made the event fun and very productive," Jones said of the experience. "The event preparation, set up and execution were flawless. Great job!"

Key this year to the success of the event was a sponsorship from AT&T. As part of its ongoing collaboration with the Consortium of Florida Education Foundations – of which the Public Education Foundation of Marion County is a member – AT&T invests in programs that increase understanding of how classroom cur-

riculum translates into careers, especially STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) careers.

Public school students were invited by their schools to attend the expos. New this year was a third event expo for private and home-schooled students and their parents.

Another highlight, added this year, was a motivational speaker. Darrell "Coach D" Andrews emphasized the importance of soft skills that employers most want: dependability/reliability, work ethic, positive attitude, communication and teamwork.

During his lively and engaging workshop, Andrews drove home the notion that "if you get the education and training that's fantastic, but if you can add soft skills, it'll make your dreams come true ... Hard skills can be taught; soft skills are a matter of choice."

Kayla Miller, a 17-year-old junior at Belleview Middle School, said, "Soft skills are something we go over all the time in school. I knew about the positive attitude, but he really reinforced it."

All told, 33 area businesses took part in the career fair portion of the expos. The businesses represent key industries where there is growth (Healthcare, IT/Technical, Manufacturing/Logistics and Public Service).

Our thanks to American Panel, ASAP Computer Services, AutoCustoms dba RealTruck, Cardinal Glass, Central Florida Phones and Internet, Cheney Brothers Inc., ClosetMaid, Columbia Bank, Department of Health Marion County, Florida Department of Corrections, E-One, eResources / ITonDemand, Florida Center for the Blind Inc., Florida Department of Children and Families, Hospice of Marion County, J-Tay Consulting, LifeSouth Community Blood Centers (Marion Region), Lockheed Martin, Marion County Fire Rescue, Moy Media, Munroe Regional Medical Center, Ocala Community Care, Ocala Health System, Ocala Electric Utility, Ocala Fire Rescue, Ocala Police Department, Principal Financial Group, Raney's Inc., Rescare Homecare, R+L Global Logistics, SECO Energy, Strive Health and Rehabilitation, The Centers, TimberRidge Nursing and Rehabilitation, Twelve Eight Media, and the United States Air Force.

In addition, during the career fair students were able to meet with education providers to learn about available programs. Our thanks to the College of Central Florida, Marion Technical College, Rasmussen College, St. Leo University, Taylor College and Withlacoochee Technical College, as well as representatives from Marion County public schools.

The following businesses also graciously participated in the industry round tables:

AutoZone, CareerSource CLM, City of Ocala, Columbia Bank, Country Meats, Custom Windows, Florida Thoroughbred Breeders and Owners Association, LifeSouth, Marion County Public Schools, Mojo Grill, Ocala Fire Rescue FEO/Paramedic, Ocala Health, Ocala/Marion County Chamber & Economic Partnership, Radiology and Associates, Raney's Inc., SPX, State Farm, Townley Manufacturing, ClosetMaid, E-One, and Principal Financial Group.

To learn more about the Marion County Youth Career Expos, call 352-873-7955 or, to view photos, visit CareerSource CLM's Facebook page by clicking on the icon at [careersourceclm.com](http://careersourceclm.com).

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