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Work study program makes for 'unbelievable experience'

Partnership helps pay tuition for low-income students

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Rick Bennett, co-founding partner of Bennett Thrasher, poses next to Grecia Tierrafria at the Bennett Thrasher headquarters in the Cumberland area of Cobb County.

CUMBERLAND — Like most teenagers, Grecia Tierrafria has a lot on her plate. The sophomore from southwest Atlanta keeps up with seven classes, soccer and two after-school groups.

But what sets Grecia apart is the five full days a month she spends working at accounting firm Bennett Thrasher in Cumberland — a job that counts toward her GPA.

Grecia attends Cristo Rey Atlanta Jesuit High School, a Catholic school for low-income students in Midtown. All students participate in the school's "corporate work study" program, working for area businesses, which in turn help pay about 70 percent of a student's tuition, according to Cristo Rey Atlanta president Bill Garrett.

"They do a lot of entry-level clerical work, so copying, scanning, filing, data entry, receptionist duty, mailroom support," Garrett said. "A lot of our students are very good with technology and so they end up helping people do PowerPoint and Excel and other kinds of (Microsoft) Office products."

Grecia said she knew what was expected of her when she first entered the school as a freshman.

“Getting a job at 14 was exciting, especially at a big corporate name,” said Grecia, now 16 and a sophomore.

She spends her Tuesdays — and one Monday a month — at Bennett Thrasher. The firm completed its first semester partnering with Cristo Rey last month, and co-founding partner Rick Bennett said it’s been an “unbelievable experience for us.

“All four of these young people are polite, considerate, smart,” Bennett said. “There’s very little here from an entry level that these students can’t do. I even want to teach them how to do some of the tax return prep and stuff like that. I haven’t gotten that done yet, but I think they’re totally capable of doing that.”

Grecia described her experience at Bennett Thrasher as different from a nonprofit. “I actually get to talk to the CEO, Mr. Bennett, and I didn’t have that last year, so it’s nerve-wracking, but I’m opening myself up to the bigger people in the company.”

Soft-spoken and shy, the oldest of eight children said she likes how the company involves her in all aspects of the company, including service projects and a recent holiday party. Her interests and aspirations range from marine biology and marketing, to art, architecture and engineering.

Whatever path she takes, Grecia says being at Bennett Thrasher has helped her see how to get her ideas realized.

“I’ve learned there’s a bigger risk if you take on an idea. I guess, trying to start my own ideas, I know I’m going to have to be more cautious of where or how I’m going to spend my money to use for it. I guess being here and talking to Mr. Bennett is going to help me try to figure out how to manage it.”

Grecia and her classmates don’t miss any class time as the work study days are built into their schedules. They are evaluated on their professional skills, such as the ability to complete projects quickly and accurately.

They also must be reliable. Being late to work, or even not being up to dress code, can cost points off a final grade.

While the stakes are high for the students, Garrett says the payoff is even greater, and it goes beyond the reduction in tuition.

“Today’s classroom environment is great, but it still doesn’t mirror correctly exactly what is happening in the workplace, so you are going to learn so many things that you simply cannot learn in the classroom.”

Grecia and her colleagues at Bennett Thrasher didn’t need to worry, however. School officials said they passed “with flying colors.” The four students have returned this semester and Bennett says having them back next school year would be ideal so the company wouldn’t have to retrain anyone.

“These four young people have been a good addition to Bennett Thrasher in terms of our culture and our work ethic and what we do, and they actually dress better than we do,” Bennett said.

To learn more about Cristo Rey or to become a partnering business in its corporate work study program, contact Garrett at 404-637-2803 or at bgarrettt@cristoreyatlantia.org.