

Breaking the Cycle: How Two YDPA Apprentices Are Healing Their Communities



*YDPA Apprentices
Jenessa Armstrong
and Luis Garcia*

“To me, that’s the biggest message with this apprenticeship — this is the perfect way to learn how to change lives.” – Luis Garcia, YDPA Apprentice

Luis Garcia, Jr. wants to be the person he wished he had in his life growing up. The 28-year-old was bullied as a kid and often felt alone in dealing with the challenges he faced growing up in North Chicago. That is, until 8th grade, when he participated in an afterschool program and connected with adult mentors who encouraged him not to give up and reassured him that he had a promising future ahead. “To this day, I remember a lot about who they are and how amazing they were,” Garcia shared. “Because of them, I’m here.” Now, Garcia is a youth program coordinator with The Community Works — a nonprofit organization in Waukegan, Illinois, that teaches young people skills they need to gain employment — as well as an apprentice in FHI 360’s Youth Development Practitioner Apprenticeship (YDPA).

ON-THE-JOB LEARNING

Apprenticeships are effective on-the-job learning opportunities for many job seekers. Traditionally, apprenticeships have been offered in trades like plumbing or carpentry. FHI 360’s YDPA program, however, is specifically designed for people who want to pursue a career working with youth. Thanks to the support of the Lake County Workforce Board, and the leadership of their executive director Jennifer Serino, YDPA has also offered some Lake County, IL, apprentices an opportunity to break patterns of trauma and bring healing to the young people in their communities.

Like Garcia, that has been the case for Jenessa Armstrong, another YDPA apprentice who was drawn to youth development work because of her experiences in childhood. “I wasn’t able to grow up having a mentor or somebody there to help me out, so I’m going to be that person” Armstrong shared. Armstrong currently works as front of house manager and trainer for Curt’s Café, a nonprofit organization with locations in Evanston and Highland Park. The program employs and trains youth who are unhoused or involved in the justice system to serve their communities in a culinary setting. The café also has social workers on staff who teach life skills to the trainees. These skills include how to manage their money, get a driver’s license, and navigate the public health and housing systems.



Employer partners like Curt's Café and The Community Works are essential to the success of the YDPA program as they provide apprentices the opportunity to apply what they've learned through on-the-job learning. Apprentices also receive training from FHI 360's National Institute of Work and Learning (NIWL), which runs the program, designs learning content, and fosters an environment wherein apprentices can support each other through facilitated meetings. The training equips apprentices with a foundation in positive youth development skills like coaching and case management. YDPA graduates receive a nationally recognized credential as youth development apprentices from the U.S. Department of Labor.

"My dream job is to be a counselor in the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (IDJJ). The credential will help me a lot," said Armstrong. Through Curt's Café's work release program, she has been able to build a connection with the department and the youth who have been involved with the court system. What she has learned through this experience has inspired her to focus her career on addressing the challenges the young people face. "It's such a vicious cycle. They get incarcerated, they come out, they go back in. I want to be able to say that I helped prevent that cycle."

YOUTH VOICES AND SAFE SPACES

One of the most important skills Armstrong has learned from the program is how to de-escalate conflicts. Because of their circumstances, many of the trainees are under tremendous stress and can lash out, she said. In the past, the café handled these situations by telling trainees to go home. Armstrong took a different approach and decided to build closer relationships with the trainees to better understand their points of view. "One of the main themes of the apprenticeship is that I give the youth a voice."

Armstrong applied these lessons with one trainee who reminded her of herself when she was younger. At first, they had a rocky start. "I remember when she first started working with me, she was very 'leave me alone, I can handle everything on my own.'" Despite this, Armstrong was patient. She always gave her trainee a voice and a safe space to be herself. Eventually, Armstrong's efforts were a success. "It's a whole 180-degree switch. Now, she's coming up to me, she's talking to me, and she enjoys working with me and doing trainings together," said Armstrong.

Garcia, who was also motivated to pursue apprenticeship due to the credential and the opportunity to apply lessons directly, had similar experiences. By emphasizing youth voices and safe spaces, he was able to connect with two reserved twins who participated in their recent summer internship program.



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“They come from a very troubled household. They didn’t talk, they didn’t react, they didn’t do anything. They just stared at their phone.”

Garcia wasn’t discouraged. He motivated them, joked with them, and got to know them. He’d become the person he wanted in his corner growing up — and it worked.

“Within a couple weeks, they started to joke around,” Garcia shared. “They started smiling. I talked to the dean of their high school and found out that their grades have gone up a lot. They’re two completely different people. We made an impact on those kids.”

LEARNING TO CHANGE LIVES

Armstrong and Garcia finish their apprenticeship in December. In pursuing her dream of becoming an IDJJ counselor, Armstrong hopes to go back to school and get a degree after the apprenticeship. She also hopes that she can use her credential as testament to the work she’s already done with youth. Looking to his future, Garcia shared that he wants to continue working in the youth services field, no matter what form that may take. He added that people often want to help others, but don’t know how. “To me, that’s the biggest message with this apprenticeship — this is the perfect way to learn how to change lives.”

YDPA is only the beginning when it comes to FHI 360 NIWL’s apprenticeship efforts. With funding from the Department of Labor’s Apprenticeship Building America grant, FHI 360 will expand its apprenticeship programs through the Promising Leaders Apprenticing in the Care Economy (PLACE) Hub. In addition to youth development, the PLACE Hub will also run apprenticeship programs in the fields of peer support counseling and substance use disorder and mental health counseling. For more information, contact apprenticeship@fhi360.org

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About FHI 360: FHI 360 is a global organization that mobilizes research, resources and relationships so people everywhere have access to the opportunities they need to lead full and healthy lives. With collaborations in over 60 countries, we work directly with local leaders to advance social and economic equity, improve health and well-being, respond to humanitarian crises and strengthen community resilience. We share data-driven insights and scalable tools that expand access and equity so communities can effectively address complex challenges, respond to shocks and achieve thriving futures.

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