

## Iowa View: This 'village' is helping the underemployed

Written by Denny Coon  
Apr. 08

desmoinesregister.com

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

THE REV. DENNY COON is pastor of Walnut Hills United Methodist Church in Urbandale. He contributes occasional essays on social issues to these opinion pages. Contact: [dennycoon@mchsi.com](mailto:dennycoon@mchsi.com).

### SUPPORT NEEDED

Ongoing financial support is needed for Project IOWA. Gov. Terry Branstad, as part of his goal of creating jobs in Iowa, has placed \$100,000 for Project IOWA in the state's next two-year budget.

### SIGNING UP

Anyone interested in Project IOWA can contact Julie Fugenschuh at [Juliefugenschuh@projectiowa.org](mailto:Juliefugenschuh@projectiowa.org)

Jalissa Daniels wrote dark poetry as an early adolescent. Her poems included references to anxiety, doubt and uncertainty. She was unclear about who she was and where she was headed.

She became pregnant at 15, graduated from Scavo Alternative High School and worked at convenient stores and temp agencies. Even though these jobs helped pay the bills, they were not fulfilling. She did find joy in part-time work with Children and Family Urban Ministries and part-time clerical work at Moulton Elementary School.

Finding full-time life's work with benefits was looking grim, however.

The Rev. Diane McClanahan, one of the pastors at Trinity United Methodist Church, encouraged Jalissa to consider a new program called Project IOWA, which was initiated by AMOS (A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy). The mission of the program is to serve as a bridge between underemployed persons seeking living-wage careers and employers seeking workers — something that would transform lives and benefit communities.

Jalissa decided to give it a try and met Julie Fugenschuh, the executive director of Project IOWA. Part of the screening included an assessment of Jalissa's motivation. It was determined that she was a good fit, and she was offered a spot in the program.

Project IOWA staff promised to work to support and encourage Jalissa if she dedicated herself to learning new skills that would be necessary for her to find a career.

There were times when Jalissa became stressed and negative thinking crept into her mind. Attending the Vision-Initiative-Perseverance class was critical in helping her stay focused as she worked through early discouragement. After learning soft skills such as good work habits, as well as the technical skills needed for her job in health care, Jalissa graduated from the program as a certified nursing assistant.

She is now employed at Mercy Medical Center. She no longer has a job; she has a career.

Jalissa's supervisor, Roxanne Tedder, remarked, "When Jalissa became employed, we struck it rich. Jalissa is in this for the right reasons. Taking care of people who are very sick is difficult, but Jalissa comes with a smile and a great attitude. Project IOWA is a great win-win situation for Jalissa, her patients and Mercy hospital."

Fugenschuh, Project IOWA's director, believes students going through the program become good employees because the students figure out they provide a needed service. The program also provides a stable employer. Students become tired of going from one job to another in the search for stable employment. Project IOWA employers provide stability and respect for their employees.

Funding for the initial start up of Project IOWA in 2012 came from AMOS members leveraging their own private

money and then receiving assistance from Making Connections, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Central Iowa Works and recently, a grant from the OPUS Foundation.

Fifty-eight Project IOWA students have successfully completed the course work and are employed. Jobs in manufacturing and health care are where most are trained at this time. Of the 30 welders who completed the advanced manufacturing course, 21 went from zero income to a median hourly wage of \$14.76 per hour. Having the benefit of health insurance is a huge motivator.

Companies involved in the project are Vermeer, DeeZee, ALMACO, EFCO, Quality Manufacturing, Tradesman Inc., EP2, Bridgestone, Kreg Tool, Mercy Health and Sauer-Danfoss. Des Moines Area Community College and Mercy College of Health Sciences play important roles in providing instruction for the students.

Scott Burgmeyer, a manager for Bridgestone American Tire, works with Project IOWA in helping future employees become certified production technicians for advanced manufacturing jobs. He serves on one of the boards at Central Iowa Works, a coalition of manufacturers that are working to help underemployed people find full-time skilled jobs with benefits.

These companies know exactly what the employees need to be successful in their business. The goal is to close the skill gap for underemployed workers who seek better paying jobs.

These manufacturing businesses are in need of workers, and those who have achieved certified production technician status and completed the VIP class have a great chance of finding jobs that pay from \$15 to \$20 an hour with benefits, which for many of these underemployed workers will double their income.

Jalissa Daniels debunks the thoughts that people using assistance programs through the state and federal governments are lazy and have no desire to improve their situations. She knows there are people who will take a chance at improving with the right collaboration. With her new self-assurance, she has a vision of becoming a nurse.

“I feel good about myself, that I found a career and can support my family,” she says.

Her placement success reinforces the theme “it takes a village.” Thanks to the foundations, employers, Department of Human Services, Scavo staff, Children and Family Urban Ministries, unknown supporters, AMOS faith communities, and supportive family members, she is on the path to a brighter day through Project IOWA.

She sees herself and her two children connected to a world where others dream of new beginnings, too. This poem of hers reflects that:

“Under the Same Sky”

There’s a little girl in Africa

Who’s polite and warm and shy

And she just can’t seem to stop

Looking at the deep blue sky.

There’s a troubled boy in Mexico

Who looks up with a sigh

And feels a sense of belonging

When looking up at the sky.

There’s a set of twins in Asia

Who daydream the day go by

And imagine a world of people

Living under the same sky.

So no matter where you come from

The sky is all the same

In the world that we live in.