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Success stories like this one show how Dallas can help residents pull themselves out of poverty

Commentary by Josephine Lopez Paul

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Adriana, a single mother of two, is a **Skill Quest** participant. Before the program, she earned \$600 a month cleaning homes, and the thought of going to school was a dream. Now when she finishes her radiology degree next year, she will be placed in a job in Dallas earning \$50,000 to start.

Stories like Adriana's are possible because of the public investment made in providing the wrap-around services for her to attend college. So that things such as rent, child care, and navigating college as a first-generation student do not create barriers that keep our future skilled workforce from graduating and meeting the job demand in our city.

So why does a city like Dallas need Adriana? The answer: Adriana represents the future of Texas. She is a young, uneducated single mother and lives below the federal poverty line. She also serves an economic opportunity for our city.

Dallas has a poverty problem. Nearly 31,000 Dallas residents who work full time all year remain impoverished. It is number one in child poverty and worst in income inequality by neighborhood in the U.S.

We have lots of poor working people. However, we can rebuild our middle class and a stronger economy by investing in people like Adriana and others. We know she is not an isolated story, but there are thousands of residents just like her who want a hand up, not a handout.

As a first-generation college student who worked two jobs and took out a payday loan to cover my last semester of college, I know how difficult this struggle is. While I did not have children, paying for my education and supporting myself was almost impossible. This struggle drove me to teach at the college level, and I saw many talented young people leave because of life's pressures.

This inspired me to become an organizer, to improve systems that fail people. After listening to thousands of people just like Adriana, SkillQuest was founded in 2011, because we could do better.

Why do our economic development policies benefit only those at the top 1 percent of our city? Millions of dollars are given in tax incentives in our city every year to companies to provide jobs. Many of these jobs do not pay a living wage (\$25 an hour for a family of four), and when the employers can't meet their goal of providing these jobs, they are forgiven from repaying.

Skill Quest and its sister job training programs across Texas such as Quest in San Antonio, Capital IDEA in Austin, Project ARRIBA in El Paso, Capital IDEA in Houston, and Project Vida in the Rio Grande Valley have been developing a skilled workforce for more than 40 years. We have a proven track record of developing middle-skilled workers.

Mark Elliott, president of the Economic Mobility Corp. and co-author of the gold-standard study on this topic said: "This model not only increased participants' earnings, it enabled graduates to reach the middle class. Few workforce development models anywhere have had as powerful an impact. This is a stunning achievement."

A 2015 report from the Ray Marshall Center at UT-Austin found that the return on investment of public funds used showed a 501 percent return over 20 years: "The taxpayer's investment is fully recouped after 8.5 years. Total returns to taxpayers are estimated at 165 percent for the first 10 years and 501 percent over 20 years."

With a proven track record of rebuilding the middle class, investment of local taxpayer dollars makes sense. If the city of Dallas wants to restore the middle class, we must fund programs like Skill Quest and invest in women like Adriana. They are the future of our city and can pull our city out of decline. Invest in us!

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