

LEADERSHIP CHAMPLAIN

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Leadership Champlain Graduate Gets a 'FRESH' Start

By StaciAnne Grove, Vermont Works for Women, LC'07

Consider the impact of growing up in a home with no working adults as role models. Or trying to explain a three year hole in your work history from your period of incarceration. Imagine getting hooked on drugs or alcohol in middle school, fighting for years to maintain your sobriety as a young adult, and being denied job interviews because of mistakes you are trying to leave behind you. Three years ago, as part of a Leadership Champlain Spring community project, I found myself face to face with trying to understand these realities that some of Vermont Works for Women (VWW) participants deal with daily.

It wasn't so much that our team chose this project - it chose us. As Tiff Bluemle, Executive Director of the VWW, presented the problems to us, the passion and commitment to helping decrease incarceration and increase employment skills was contagious. Through a wide variety of programs, Vermont Works for Women helps women and girls recognize their potential and explore, pursue and excel in work that leads to economic independence. VWW was looking to identify national transitional employment models for women returning to the community from incarceration. For many of our Leadership Champlain group, it was the first time looking in depth at so many interdependent issues: workforce development, incarceration, substance abuse, women's issues, and social ventures.

Within days we were researching programs across the United States. Within weeks, we were talking with national business and government leaders and experts about what programming worked and what didn't. Our team saw the hard work, persistence, activism, and community support required for transitional jobs programs that had successes. Boldly, our group charged ahead and developed a business named FRESH and possible social ventures. We were that certain that the programming VWW was exploring would succeed.

I'm proud to say that VWW's Transitional Jobs program recently started its 9th cycle. This program offers women in Chittenden County job-readiness training followed by short term placements with local employers. Both em-

ployers and participants receive on-going support from VWW as part of the process. The program offers a combination of hands-on learning and instruction to prepare women for permanent employment.

VWW launched a second program, FRESH Energy, last year in collaboration with Jeanne Morrissey. The crew has worked on projects from weatherization of units in Northgate to solar tracker installation. Almost three years later, Vermont Works for Women received notification of a funding to launch a third program affected by our team's research. FRESH Food will be assisting childcare centers in providing nutritious meals. It is envisioned that the program will branch out and provide a trained transitional work crew for local specialty food businesses and restaurants.

Vermont Works for Women is building confidence, teaching skills and changing lives on a daily basis. I'm blessed to count mine as one of them. Leadership Champlain opened a door for me to learn more about who I was and grow as a staff and community member. On a daily basis and broader scope, I now work with the very same women who challenged and inspired me throughout our project. As I write this, the campers of another VWW program, Rosie's Girls, are preparing to take wing with the Vermont Flight Academy. It's great to work with women and girls who will one day be the next Leadership Champlain class members.

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