

GUESS WHO GOT A MAKE

BUSINESS

Jobs program gives newbies a sweet start

By [Catherine Curan](#)

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Through EMM Group, Luis Vargas has found his calling as a pastry chef.

Photo: Helayne Seidman

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A year ago, Luis Vargas seemed stuck in the ranks of New York City's 172,000 young adults who are not in school or working.

Now he's a full-time pastry chef at fast-growing local restaurant run by EMM Group. Vargas has found his calling in the kitchen, baking decadent desserts like the chocolate brownie cake dished out at Meatpacking hotspot Catch NYC.

Vargas, who has a GED but no college education, broke free from low-paid, occasional hours at a fast-food chain thanks to job application and résumé assistance from the Lower East Side Employment Network (LESEN).

"The network showed me a lot of things I didn't know before," said the 24-year-old Manhattan resident. "It changed my life."

The Great Recession and its aftermath have exacerbated a decades-long youth employment crisis, particularly for young minorities.

A young person's first job is a crucial stepping-stone to financial health and to prominent rites of passage into adulthood, like renting or owning a home.

"Early work is a predictor for later work and higher income, so the lack can have [dire] consequences," says Patrice Cromwell, director of the economic development integration initiative at the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

But with the city's unemployment rate standing at 8.4 percent, young people like Vargas, with limited experience and education, are among the hardest hit. They face stagnant wages, a shift toward low-wage positions, and fierce competition from older skilled workers, notes a May 2013 report from nonprofit organization JobsFirstNYC. In fact, 20 percent of New Yorkers between the ages of 18 and 24 are out of work or out of school.

LESEN is one of several small but innovative new programs helping young New Yorkers

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find work. These programs reflect a new collaborative spirit between nonprofits and businesses, and a new focus on smoothing the way for companies to hire young people.

“Talent gets harder to find as we grow. LESEN makes it easier,” said Todd Enany, director of operations at EMM Group, which has added 10 LESEN youths to its staff of 700.

Two of the most promising initiatives that address the problem of youth joblessness:

The Lower East Side Employment Network

A partnership among several Lower East Side nonprofits including Henry Street Settlement, LESEN placed 54 people, including 19 youths, in jobs in its first year and aims to double that figure this year.

Year Up NYC

Begun in 2006, this job-training and corporate internship program now serves 270 young adults and plans to aid 350 by 2015. Average earnings are \$19 to \$20 an hour; one grad landed a \$65,000-a-year gig at Facebook

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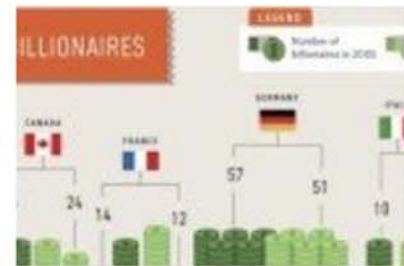
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