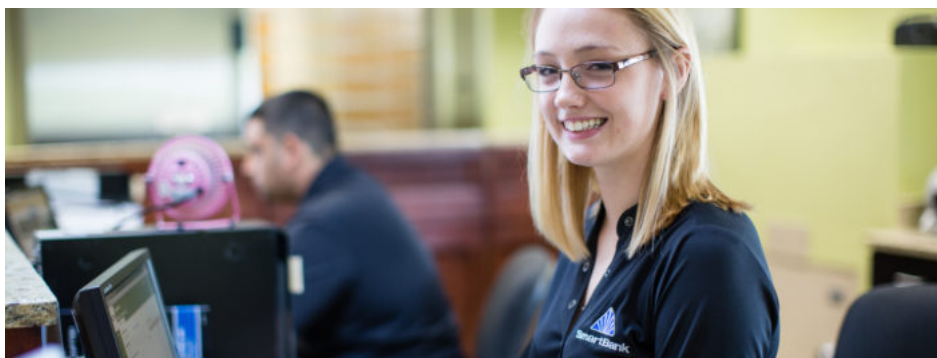


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Alexis Jackson was an intern working in customer service at Smartbank during the first summer of STEP-UP Chattanooga.

Chattanooga Students Stepping Up

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BY STAFF EDITOR ON OCTOBER 31, 2016

COMMUNITY



When it comes to finding job opportunities, it's important to have a network of supporters who believe in you, can help guide you and even introduce you to potential employers. A new program in Chattanooga is helping disadvantaged high school students learn how to create or widen their networks.

STEP-UP Chattanooga is modeled on the successful high school internship program created in Minneapolis and saw its first interns matched with Chattanooga businesses this summer.

STEP-UP is designed to teach public school juniors and seniors how to successfully work in a business setting and then place them in summer internships with local businesses, where they will receive on-the-job training and establish valuable professional relationships.

"I was kind of nervous about the interview, but we did workshops to help us prepare and create a résumé," says Destiny O'Dell, who worked in visitors services at the Tennessee Aquarium.

Fellow aquarium intern Madison Mercer felt the same way, adding that her experience was great.



BlueCross Senior Vice President Calvin Anderson traveled to Minneapolis with Public Education Foundation leaders to learn about STEP-UP. The BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee Health Foundation awarded a \$300,000 grant to help launch the program in Chattanooga.



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"I think STEP-UP is amazing for people from low-income families, like me, who might not otherwise be presented with these opportunities," Mercer said.

Her manager said STEP-UP prepared the students well for their interviews and their jobs.

"Madison came with a very professional appearance. She made great eye contact. She was basically a pro already," says Andrew Kroeger, admissions and reservations manager at the Tennessee Aquarium.

Following a proven model

STEP-UP was implemented by the Public Education Foundation (PEF), and follows the model of the highly successful STEP-UP program in Minneapolis.



Former Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak visited Chattanooga to advise Public Education Foundation leaders on establishing STEP-UP here.

In 12 years, 22,000 teens have gone through the program in Minneapolis, according to that city's former Mayor R.T. Rybak, who helped Chattanooga leaders get their program started.

"It was about enlightened self-interest of every business in town recognizing that if we could take this next generation and get them woven into the workforce early, we could create an economic boom for the city of Minneapolis," Rybak said. "And, it was true."

Rybak said Chattanooga is starting the program in a stronger position than his city was when STEP-UP was created there.

The Chattanooga interns were in agreement that the program worked for them.

"I really have enjoyed the job," says Alexis Mercer, who worked as a financial services representative at SmartBank. "The clients are friendly and I love my co-workers."

"It has really been good working with Alexis," says Barbara George, her branch manager. "She is a very friendly, outgoing person. She was a little shy when she first came to SmartBank, but within a few weeks she really opened up. She knows how to greet customers. She's a quick learner, and a very well-rounded person."

Addressing an economic need for a growing city

PEF Vice President Stacy Lightfoot leads the STEP-UP Chattanooga program and said it can be an important piece in solving a problem facing Chattanooga – not enough qualified workers to fill available jobs.

Rybak says that problem can get worse as a "silver tsunami" of retirements by older workers increases in the coming years.

Robert Long, CEO of Chattanooga-based Chattem, maker of many of the world's most popular over the counter health products, see promise in STEP-UP.

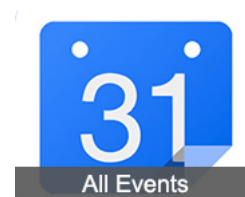
"For Chattem the benefit of supporting the STEP-UP program is two fold. There's the benefit to the community to provide opportunities to young students that will develop in their careers," Long said. "We had the opportunity to work with two great young students who are going to college and have the opportunity to grow and develop into potentially future employees for our company. We look forward to staying in touch with both of them as they continue their education, and develop what they can bring not only to Chattem but to the greater Chattanooga area."



Stacy Lightfoot, vice president of the Public Education Foundation, leads the STEP-UP Chattanooga program.

How STEP-UP Chattanooga works

PEF takes interested students through an application and preparation process before they join a company's workplace. It looks like this:



- Applicants complete a [STEP-UP online application](#)
- A STEP-UP Chattanooga team member contacts applicants to go over the required steps to complete work readiness training and mock interviews
- Interns participate in work-readiness training
- Interns are matched with jobs based on their interests and skills and the needs of the employer
- Interns are interviewed and hired by employers
- Summer interns work at their summer jobs from mid-June to mid-August

Calvin Anderson, a senior vice president for BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee says STEP-UP Chattanooga is a positive move for the future of the community overall and students in particular.

"STEP-UP Chattanooga allows us to dramatically raise the quality of our workforce, while significantly improving opportunities for our young people," Anderson says. "Best of all, we know it works."

Community funding gets program started

The first two years for STEP-UP Chattanooga are funded by a \$300,000 grant from the BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee Health Foundation and \$200,000 from the Benwood Foundation.

The verdict from the front lines

The first year of STEP-UP got positive reviews from many of its participating interns and their managers.

Following is a sample of their feedback.

LaCara Bell, Tennessee Aquarium intern: "My experience at the aquarium this summer was something new, because I'd never had a job before. I can say that I really enjoyed it because the guests are really friendly. And it was an opportunity to let people I've never met get a taste of my personality and my happy nature. That was really fun."

Patrick Swiecichowski, ASA Engineering intern: "I really like this kind of work. It's really interesting. You can do some office work, or you can do some actual hands-on work. You can do surveying, or you can design parking lots or buildings. That's why I think I might want to get a job in engineering."

Kentrell Evans, Chattem intern: "I plan on being a mechanical engineer, but I work with a lot of chemical engineers and I like what they're doing. It doesn't feel like work at all. The work environment at Chattem is family. You hear that when you walk through the door and you see it and feel it. If I ever need anything they are there for me. Chattem is where it's at."

Christian Sinclair, BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee intern: "Working in such a great company with great people gave me a true understanding of corporate America. I was pleased to have an amazing group of co-workers whom I truly look up to and admire. I've gained so much knowledge and understanding about my department and what they do in our community and I'm looking forward to possibly pursuing a career in the field of public relations and communications."

Leigh McCormack, principal research scientist at BlueCross: "(Intern Micah Darden's) enthusiasm and drive was refreshing. He wanted to learn and jumped right in and asked questions. He got to be a part of our medication adherence work which hopefully gave him some insight as to how his aspirations to be a pharmacist might be applicable in the managed care setting. All-in-all it was great having Micah as part of the team. It was a reminder of how each of us is in a different stage of our professional lives and how that unique combination of opinions and experiences makes our work well-rounded."

STEP-UP program 2016 employers were:

- Application Researchers
- Asa Engineering & Consulting, Inc.
- Benwood Foundation
- Bessie Smith Cultural Center
- BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee
- Booker T. Washington State Park
- Chattanooga Chamber
- Chattanooga Gas Company
- Chattanooga Library
- Chattanooga Lookouts
- Chattanooga News Chronicle
- Chattanooga Renaissance Fund

- Chattanooga State Comm Coll
- Chattanooga Times Free Press
- Chattem
- Chattanooga Zoo
- CHI Memorial
- CO.LAB
- City of Chattanooga
- Creative Discovery Museum
- EPB
- Erlanger Health Systems
- The Links, Incorporated
- Memorable Events
- Northside Neighborhood House
- Public Education Foundation
- River City Company
- SmartBank
- Southeast Diesel
- Southeastern Salvage
- SunTrust Bank
- Tech Town Foundation, Inc.
- Tennessee Aquarium
- UnitedWay of Greater Chattanooga
- Vision Hospitality
- Warren & Griffin Law Firm
- WRCB
- WTCI-TV

Story by **Gary Tanner** for **BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee**; Photography by **Sergio Plecas**. *Promotional content provided by BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee. BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee, Inc. and BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee Health Foundation, Independent Licensees of the BlueCross BlueShield Association.*



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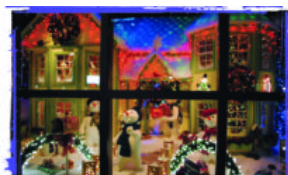


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