

The New York Times

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From Anti-'Uppity' to Upwardly Mobile

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Published: December 25, 2005

WHEN she was growing up in a New York City housing project, Stacy Abrego says, she thought that highly skilled professionals were "uppity." And she had no reason to change that view while holding a series of "little jobs here and there" into her mid-20's, she says.

But she was proved wrong a year and a half ago, she says, by an organization that uses volunteers from the ranks of corporate professionals to train and serve as mentors to low-income people for office jobs and then helps them seek new jobs. The nonprofit organization, StreetWise Partners, has guided her onto a career track that is more financially and psychologically rewarding than her previous path, Ms. Abrego, 27, said recently after a day's work as an administrative assistant at the United Way of New York City.

She attributed her job there to her training and referral by StreetWise Partners. She said her work at the United Way was more challenging, and offered more room for growth, than her previous jobs, like tending bar and working as a telephone operator for a messenger service.

"You could call them at any time for advice," she said, referring to the people who helped her at StreetWise - the kind of people she used to imagine as uppity.

Ms. Abrego is one of nearly 700 New York area residents who have completed StreetWise's free programs since the group was founded in 1997 by three corporate professionals.

"We wanted to create a bridge between people who are in the business world and know how it works and low-income people who are motivated to change their lives but don't have the skills or the network," said one of the founders, Matthew Gorin, 32, who works for Oncore Capital, a venture capital firm.

StreetWise, based in Manhattan, began with two 12-week programs a year in which the volunteer instructors and mentors met with the program's clients in three-hour Saturday sessions. The sessions combined group workshops with individual assistance from the mentors assigned to each client. The two Saturday programs are now 15 weeks each and have a total of about 80 clients a year.

Similar programs have been added on Wednesday evening with about 40 clients annually, said StreetWise's executive director, Angie Datta Kamath.

"Half the curriculum is job readiness skills - résumé and job-letter writing, public speaking, interviews, workplace etiquette," she said. The rest is training in basic computer skills, including Microsoft Word, Excel and PowerPoint.

Besides a low income, admission to the programs requires a high school diploma or its equivalent, English-language skills, some typing ability and



Casey Kelbaugh for The New York Times

WORKING MOTHER Stacy Abrego and her daughter, Sydney, 2, at the United Way of New York City, which hired Ms. Abrego after she completed a training program.

strong motivation, she said. The training is intended to prepare people for jobs ranging from mailroom clerk to accounting specialist. Further information is available at (212) 971-0078 or www.streetwisepartners.org.

The sessions are held at PricewaterhouseCoopers, the accounting and consulting firm, and Credit Suisse First Boston, the investment banking firm. Both are among the companies, nonprofit groups and universities where StreetWise graduates have found jobs.

Mr. Gorin was with PricewaterhouseCoopers when he helped found StreetWise, as was another founder, Rahul Advani, who is now with Energy Capital Partners, a private equity firm. The third founder, Erica Skala Napach, is with Pacific Strategic Investors, a money management firm.

Most of the 500 volunteer instructors and mentors are from the financial sector, Ms. Kamath said. Joanne Lee, StreetWise's director of business development and strategy, said that about 70 percent of the group's clients find office work, from internships to full-time jobs, some with her group's help and some on their own.

Ms. Abrego, a Queens resident and a single parent of a 2-year-old girl, went through the StreetWise program last year. She began her full-time job at United Way three months ago, earning \$640 a week as an administrative assistant to a senior director.

Her series of unsatisfying jobs after high school ended with work as a bank teller, which she left in 2003 after she became pregnant. She was on welfare after her daughter, Sydney, was born, but "I was determined to get back to work," she said - though not in another job that she was likely to find stultifying.

"I knew I had to improve my skills," she said.