

Businesses help put 500 teens to work

By Christopher Baxter, Globe Correspondent | July 1, 2008

In a surging Boston nightclub, Keenan Cooks learned the rhythm of hip-hop as a 5-year-old. "Dance was all I knew," said Cooks, now 17, whose mother would sneak him into the clubs where she worked.

But turning his inner beat into bucks has not been easy. In a slow economy and a city full of young people, Cooks took the only job he could find last year: scooping ice cream.

This summer, two major city businesses are helping the Roxbury teenager return to his passion. He will be teaching hip-hop classes to young people as part of a citywide jobs effort to employ youths in offices and with nonprofit organizations.

More than 500 teenagers will find work this year as part of the program announced yesterday by the Boston Globe Foundation and John Hancock Financial Services Inc. City officials and organizers hailed the \$1 million Boston Summer Scholars initiative as the largest corporate summer jobs program in the city this year.

"Now I can stop bugging my mom for money," said 14-year-old Shannon Toland, standing with friends before the kickoff event at Boston University's Agganis Arena. Toland will work with children at the South Boston Boys and Girls Club beginning next week. "It's my first job. I think I would [otherwise] have had a tough time at 14 finding a first job."

Toland is right on the money. Teen employment rates dropped to historically low levels this year as the nation's labor market continues to shed jobs, an April study by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University said. Between 2003 and 2007, national employment rose 8.7 million, the report said, but teen employment fell by 10,000.

The overall economic outlook for youths remains bleak, the study said. But the national problem should not diminish the importance of Boston's new summer jobs, Mayor Thomas M. Menino told reporters.

"My reaction is that 500 jobs is a significant number," said Menino, whose city summer job program employed more than 9,000 teenagers last year.

But this summer is more difficult, he said. "A lot of companies are laying off folks. . . . But we can't accept it. We have to work hard."

Kelsey Arbona, 17, of Roslindale found work one summer in a restaurant, but "it was just a job," she said. But Arbona, who used to draw on a computer, found work this summer at Artists for Humanity, where she can create art - and get paid to do it. "I've always loved art," Arbona said. "It's so awesome that it's a job."

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