

City students train for accounting careers with VITA program

By **SCOTT WHIPPLE**

STAFF WRITER

NEW BRITAIN — City school kids have been looking for a career route they can follow. Brandon Figueroa may have found one. How many 16-year-olds can boast they have prepared tax returns as a certified tax preparer?

Since 2009, Figueroa, along with than 80 volunteers, have participated in the Human Resources Agency of New Britain, Inc.'s VITA (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance) Program. HRA operates the program in partnership with New Britain High School.

Caren Dickman, a communications and grant development specialist for HRA, learned early on that in VITA's Adult Program most parents didn't know their working children needed to file tax returns. Yet 16 percent of New Britain's high school students are working part-time while going to school.

HRA's Marlo Greponne, director of planning and programs and VITA manager, saw an opportunity to work with the school to prepare tax returns not only for working youths, but to encourage possible accounting careers.

"The VITA Youth Program opened my eyes to a wider range of accounting functions," said Figueroa. "It's more than just something to put on your resume. The staff teaches the tax rules, but equally important — they build community with city residents."

Figueroa says he was inspired by his teacher, Sondra Sanford.

A career and technology division chairwoman and a former VITA volunteer, Sanford embraced the idea of a youth program.

"Mrs. Sanford puts 150 percent into everything she does and was always there when I needed her," Figueroa says. "Without her help I wouldn't be where I am today."

Students in NBHS's business classes become certified IRS tax preparers, preparing tax returns for their peers who work part-time

ACCOUNTING CAREERS

Starting salaries for accounting graduates on the rise.

According to a recent survey by National Association of Colleges and Employers, the average starting salary for accounting graduates this year is \$53,300, up from \$49,700 in 2012. In 2011 the average starting salary for accounting graduates was \$50,500.

Michael Casey, general manager for the publication, Going Concern, says business has increased for most CPA firms by 7 to 10 percent for 2013 through 2014.

"Accounting services is a by-product; the year-over-year demand for qualified candidates has gone up," he says.

after school. Student volunteers gain real-world experience, earn a

credential and academic credit while contributing to their community-service requirement. In the first year, volunteers prepared 15 tax returns. Four years later, volunteers prepared 62 tax returns.

Working students and their families also benefit by increasing their income; they realized \$117,126 in federal tax refunds during the 2013 tax season alone.

Figueroa continued to volunteer with VITA until he graduated, but his dedication to the program didn't end there. Though he is currently working and attending University of Connecticut full-time, he found time to volunteer for VITA again this past tax season.

In fact, Figueroa brought HRA's VITA tax preparation services onsite to Integra-Cast, Inc., the New Britain manufacturing firm where he works. This way, employees could have their taxes prepared in between shifts.

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