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When Taxes Return More than Money

Not many people can say that they became Certified Tax Preparers and prepared tax returns at the age of 16. Brandon Figueroa can. He is among the 80+ volunteers who have participated in the Human Resources Agency of New Britain, Inc.'s (HRA) VITA Youth Program since 2009. The only one of its kind in the state, HRA operates this program in partnership with the New Britain High School.

HRA's VITA's Adult Program learned early on that most parents did not know their working children should file tax returns – yet 16% 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 New Britain High School to prepare tax returns for these youth and to encourage career paths in the accounting field. Mrs. Sondra Sanford, Career and Technology Division Chair and a former VITA volunteer at college, embraced the idea.

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

Brandon took business classes in high school and was particularly inspired by Mrs. Sanford. He praises all of the teachers in the Business Department but feels that Mrs. Sanford stands out because "she puts 150% into everything she does and was always there when I needed her. Without her help I wouldn't be where I am today."

Students in NBHS's business classes become Certified IRS Tax Preparers to prepare tax returns for their peers who work part-time after school. The student volunteers gain real world experience, earn a credential, earn academic credit and contribute to their community service requirement. In the first year volunteers prepared 15 tax returns. Four years later the program has more than quadrupled – during the 2013 tax season student volunteers prepared 62 tax returns.

Working students and their families benefit by increasing their income – this totaled \$117,126 in federal tax refunds during the 2013 tax season. These families also collectively gained \$43,325 in the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).



Brandon Figueroa just completed his freshman year at the University of Connecticut where he is majoring in Accounting. A graduate of New Britain High School in 2012, he attends school full-time and works full-time in accounting at Integra-Cast, Inc., a small manufacturing company in New Britain. Integra-Cast, Inc. has been recruiting student interns from New Britain High School for the past 7 years. Brandon began working there when he was 16, the same year he became an IRS Certified Tax Preparer and volunteered with HRA's VITA Youth Program.

He continued to volunteer with VITA until he graduated but his dedication to the program did not end with there. Even though he is working and going to school full-time he managed to find time to volunteer for VITA again this past tax season. In fact, he went a step further. He brought HRA's VITA tax preparation services on-site to Integra-Cast, Inc. so that the employees could have their taxes prepared in between shifts at work.