

NATIONALS PARK

Concessions Program Helps Put Young People Back in the Game

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Working the Mayorga Coffee stall 129 at Nationals Park, Charnika Burts has energy and a plan.

"I want to train to be a computer technician," she said. "I love computers."

Two years ago, Burts dropped out of Anacostia High School in her senior year, quit playing basketball and stopped thinking about a future. Soon she was drifting from one minimum-wage job to another.

"Every day I ask myself why I dropped out, and I still can't figure it out," she said. "Doesn't anybody get a decent job without a school diploma?"

The ballpark coffee stall might be her ticket to getting back on track.

She is one of 25 D.C. teenagers recruited for a youth development program run by Juma Ventures, a San Francisco-based nonprofit group that helps people from ages 16 to 20 work stadium concession stands, most of them on the West Coast. The idea is to help them work their way toward higher education.

Burts, 19, got her break about two months ago when an acquaintance mentioned a job fair. Juma's recruiters were there, and they hired her the next day. "They told me I speak very well and that I had an impressive personality," Burts said.

She went to work at the stadium on Opening Day.

Marc Spencer, executive director of the program, flew to Washington this week to see the new operation.

"The idea is to get them work and then higher education," he said.

But what is a West Coast group doing in the District?

"One of our business associates, Centerplate, got the concession for the Nationals ballpark and invited us," he said.

Besides, he added, it can't hurt to have a presence in the nation's capital.

"We provide the concessionaires a reliable pool of workers. . . . They also get to fulfill their corporate social responsibility. It's a win-win," Spencer said.

Martin Mayorga of Mayorga Coffee, which supplies the Juma stalls at Nationals Park, said he has been impressed with the teenagers.

"The opening night was very busy, and these kids were so amazing. I'm yet to encounter a problem in the operations," he said.

Spencer's organization uses community and church groups to find participants. "We look for diamonds in the rough," he said.

The participants earn \$8 an hour, "work 10 to 15 hours a week and get paid incentives for going beyond our sales targets," Spencer said. "We help them with researching colleges, filling out forms, applying for financial aid and scholarships. We open bank accounts for them and contribute \$2 for every dollar they save, up to a maximum of \$4,000."

The three-year-old program has employed 760 teenagers, he said, and most have gone on to college or some form of higher education.

At the moment, Juma only has a contract with the Nationals, but Spencer said he hopes to expand to other teams so participants can work throughout the year. "Working in stadiums is also good education in dealing with people," Spencer said.

Burts agrees: "I love this. I like meeting people in a happening place."

She lives in a public housing complex off Alabama Avenue SE with her grandmother, her four siblings and three cousins. Her grandmother, Juanita Burts-Johnson, is pleased "the job keeps her busy and off the streets."

"She is such a smart kid," Burts-Johnson said. "Her teachers tried to prevent her from dropping out, but she just wouldn't listen."

For several years, Burts's mother, who struggles with addiction, has been in and out of jail, Burts's grandmother said. She has been incarcerated since December.

Burts's father lives in Chicago, and she hasn't seen him in five years, she said. But it is her mother she longs for most.

"I really miss my mother," Burts said.

Trophies from her days of playing basketball and running track sit above the television in her family's small living room. "Suddenly, I just didn't want to play [basketball] anymore," she said.

That seems a long time ago now. Back at the coffee stall, she leads a team of four other workers. Her plan is to go to night school this fall and then on to a computer course.

"I won't go back to Anacostia High," she said. "I know too many people there. I will get distracted."

Burts visits her mother on Mondays when work permits. "She said she was really proud of me when she heard of the job," said Burts, who has her mother's name tattooed on her arm. She rubbed it as she spoke.

"She said I should not end up like her."