

News

Grafton Job Corps Celebrates 50th Anniversary

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Tyrell Pyatt, a Grafton Job Corps student, sings the national anthem at the start of the celebration. (JOHN FERRARONE)

GRAFTON – Ralik Johnson was drifting in college and trying to figure out what he wanted to do in life. Meanwhile, he was also in a gang, selling drugs and smoking marijuana every day.

Had he not enrolled at Job Corps, he said, he would still be doing the same thing and probably carrying a gun as well.

After two years in Job Corps, the 22-year-old articulate, bright and well-liked young man is soaring. The Philadelphia native transferred to the Grafton center to get into one of the organization's only two human service programs in the country. Last week, he completed his certification in human services and is now doing an internship as an assistant teacher in the human services department at the facility. He said he's looking forward to working with down-and-out youths and inspiring them with his story of how he found a better life.

"Coming to Job Corps ... coming to Grafton, gave me the opportunity to say, 'I don't have to do that anymore.' I don't have to say, 'I can have a job at McDonald's and go and sell drugs,'" he said.

Mr. Johnson, former president of the student government associations at both Job Corps locations, was one of the speakers at the center's celebration of the national organization's 50th anniversary.

Job Corps was started in 1964, as the central program of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. Since its inception, it has provided more than 2 million youths, ages 16 through 24, with free-of-charge vocational and academic training to help improve their lives.

The local Job Corp center at 100 Pine Street — among 125 nationwide — has served more than 12,000 youths since it opened in 1981.



Gladys Rodriguez-Parker, longtime aide of U.S. Rep. James P. McGovern, D-Worcester, is among the facility's graduates. She and several other representatives of state and local lawmakers read proclamations. She advised students to heed the advice and encouragement in the proclamations and to remember that it is elected officials who appropriate the resources to provide their training.

"Who would have 'thunk' that this girl who was your age ... sitting in your shoes not too long ago, from the projects ... with the same story as the young man you just heard would be working for a member of the U.S. Congress?" she asked, evoking laughter and applause from the room full of more than 200 students.

She told them that life is very short and the choices that they are making now will determine the quality of their futures.

"What does the Job Corps do for you? It offers you an opportunity to earn that living in the future to be able to offer your family ... your child (things) your parents may not have been able to do for you," she said.

Mark Riolo, the center's director, said the reason Job Corps is still around after half a century is because it's working. Job Corps, he said, improves the quality of lives — not just the lives of those who complete the program — but also the lives of families and generations. It fosters community, responsibility and a strong work ethic, he said.

"The mission of Job Corps is the mission of America. If you have the will to sacrifice and work hard, you can succeed, and you will succeed regardless of the outcome of previous attempts," he said.