

Trenton-based Isles Youth Institute gives troubled students a second chance



Amy Reynolds/The Times of Trenton By **Amy Reynolds/The Times of Trenton**

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TRENTON — At 17, Will Hunter was incarcerated for shoplifting. He was scared, his heart was pounding and he didn't see himself completing high school.

But Hunter, now 19, graduated in December from Isles Youth Institute, which was formerly known as the Isles YouthBuild program, and he sees himself having a successful future.

"YouthBuild was like a second chance to me," Hunter said. "I don't think I would have made it through school, I really don't."

Tomorrow, 19 students will attend the Isles Youth Institute commencement at Grounds for Sculpture in Hamilton to celebrate all they have accomplished.

Isles Youth Institute is an alternative high school for dropouts and students who had challenges completing traditional high school. It offers academic and vocational training with an emphasis on leadership development and civic engagement.

"It's not just getting the GED — it's learning all of the programs we have offered here for them, getting an opportunity for employment," said Joyce Miller, a GED and literacy teacher for Isles. "We've had some great successes."

Isles Youth Institute caters to young adults age 16 to 24, Miller said. Many of the students have been involved with the juvenile justice system, some have children and others have dropped out of traditional high schools.

Brittany Hodges, 19, is a single parent. She graduated from Isles Youth Institute in November, completed a certified nursing assistant program there, and will take the state test this week.

Hodges started her freshman year of high school at Trenton Catholic Academy but said the school wasn't for her. She first went to Isles Youth Institute in 2012, but her mom had passed away about a year earlier and she wasn't yet ready for school.

"I wasn't really worried about school. I had a dysfunctional mind," Hodges said. But she realized that if she didn't go back to school, her daughter probably wouldn't want to go either. "I decided I needed to get an education."

Hodges started attending Isles again in 2013.

Hunter, too, said traditional school wasn't the right fit for him, and at first he didn't think Isles would be any different.

"I thought it was going to be just like regular school, and regular school wasn't working for me," he said. "I had a lot of friends (at Trenton High) — well, people who I thought were my friends. I would never go to class. At one point I was really trying, but then I just started kicking it in with the crowd, never going to class."

Hunter's biggest difficulty was changing his attitude, he said.

"I had a bad attitude, like super bad," he said. "Over the years I just grew up. I just started realizing what life was, and life's really hard. My mom started struggling and I was like, 'Wow, that could be me.' I started seeing people fall, seeing bad things happening to people, and I didn't want that life." Both students said their proudest moments were getting their GEDs.

“(Isles) showed me they cared. They put a lot of time into me,” Hodges said. “They’re my other set of family.”

When Miller started teaching at Isles about 4½ years ago, she was expecting to stay only a few months.

She said seeing students complete the program is what has kept her hooked.

“We have a lot of very fine young people here who need a place that will appreciate their abilities and potential. And that’s what we do,” Miller said.

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