

Interns, getting foot in the door, bring diversity to workplace

Program with two prongs: Boost minority presence, hook students into local workforce

By SUE LOUGHLIN
TRIBUNE-STAR

Shanya Tompkins interviewed with Coldwell Banker-Troy Helman Realtors, anticipating an eight-week, part-time summer internship.

Instead, Bernice Helman was so impressed with the 18-year-old Terre Haute North Vigo High School graduate, she hired her as a full-time intern for the summer. Tompkins also will continue to work there after she begins her studies at Indiana State University in the fall.

Right now, Tompkins is working with relocation services, but she is learning many other aspects of the

business, too. "I love my stay here," Tompkins said Thursday. "I'm so excited they are allowing me to stay throughout college. I'm very, very grateful!"

She is one of 15 Vigo County School Corp. incoming seniors or recent graduates participating in a diversity internship program involving 12 employers this summer. The program started off seven years ago with one employer, Garmong, and last year, Joink also got involved.

Late this spring, after a breakfast meeting hosted by Norm Lowery, president and CEO of First Financial Bank, and Dan Tanoos, VCSC superintendent, more



employers agreed to participate. The goal in expanding the program is to encourage a more diverse workforce in the community.

The internships help show

minority students in Terre Haute that there are opportunities here for them, Carolyn Roberts, ISU diversity consultant, has said. Then, they might view the community "as

Learning and loving it: Vigo County School Corp. Diversity Internship intern Shanya Tompkins (center) reacts as she is quizzed about the realty business by Coldwell Banker Troy Helman Realtors' Bernice Helman, left, on Thursday at the business. Tompkins, 18, has been learning the ins and outs of the business during her internship and has been assisting Samantha Syester, right, the company's assistant relocation director.

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a place to stay or come back." The students, who typically have just finished their junior year of high school, work 20 hours a week; the internship lasts about six to eight weeks.

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They are strong academically and involved in community service, and many participate in athletics.

Roberts and high school principals reach out to students they believe would be good candidates for the program, and students must prepare a resume and go through an interview process.

The expanded internship program is going well, Roberts said Monday. "I've had nothing but great reviews from every employer," she said. The employers are learning about some incredible talent and also how diversity helps their companies.

Through the internship, Tompkins said she's improved her communication and networking skills and has learned how to work as a team and pay better attention to detail. "Every little detail matters," she said.

By working in relocation services, she's learned that many people do want to move to Terre Haute. "Obviously, something is going on here that people want to be part of," Tompkins said. "I'm determined to be part of it, too."

Helman, the real estate agency vice president, said the company has been impressed with Tompkins from the start. "From the first call Shanya made to us, we were so taken with her professionalism. She interviewed very well. She did all the follow-up," Helman said. "We felt she was a good fit."

Helman believes the diversity internship program is a good way to help keep some of Terre Haute's top talent right here in the community as these students go to college and pursue careers.

At Garmong, North Vigo senior Ashaun Miller is this year's summer intern. Among other duties, Miller has worked with and shadowed project managers and



How it all comes together: Vigo County School Corp. Diversity Internship participant Ashaun Miller (right) listens as Garmong Construction's Brian Martin explains how the construction process works during a visit to a job site on Wednesday.

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engineers at construction sites, including a new \$8.5-million Army National Guard maintenance facility at Terre Haute International Airport.

When he's working in the office, he might be processing requests for information or revising documents.

"He's a delight to have around the office. He has a great personality and engages well. He clearly is an asset to the team," said Ralph Wagle, president of Garmong Construction.

Miller, a North Vigo senior, said he's gaining real-world experience at Garmong and has learned a lot about construction, including the importance of teamwork. "The people at Garmong are a team and they rely on each other to do their part, correctly," he said.

Miller said the internship has opened his eyes to the opportunities that exist in Terre Haute. While he hasn't yet decided on his future plans and wants to explore options, he said he "wouldn't have a problem coming

back" to Terre Haute some day.

Another intern, Nana Dadzie, is working with United Way of the Wabash

Valley. On Mondays, he works in the office, and the rest of the week, he helps staff the mobile market, which takes fresh produce to different sites and sells those items at costs typically lower than most grocery stores.

Dadzie, who will be a North Vigo senior, said he's developing better communication and people skills as he interacts with the public. He's enjoying the internship. "I wanted to feel like I'm helping people out," he said.

The internship is giving him an opportunity to network and make contacts that could help him secure employment in the future, he said.

Chris Wood, United Way campaign associate, said Dadzie "is a big help to us. He's great with customers. We go to a lot of elderly housing and that kind of thing, and he's a great help to those who can't maybe come aboard. He'll shop for them."

Earlier in the day, Dadzie had bought a box of cashews for a customer who didn't have enough money. "It was really kind of sweet," Wood said.

Alexandria Miles, who is interning at MillerWhite Marketing, said it's one of the best opportunities she's had. "I feel that I have a leg up on my peers due to the fact that I now have experience in a professional environment," she said. "This internship opportunity has really made me proud to live in a community that gives qualified young people a chance regardless of race. I am very thankful."

Brian Miller, co-owner of MillerWhite, said the internship "has worked out great." Miles, who graduated from Terre Haute South Vigo High School this year, has assisted in the front office and also worked on analytical reports. She is meeting staff and clients and learning various aspects of the business.

Miles will attend Indiana State University this fall. Tanoos said the diversity internship program is needed and "has really blossomed into a model for other communities."

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Gaining experience: Nana Dadzie of Ghana is interning with the United Way this summer, helping out on the Mobile Garden.

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