Intern program offers first step on ladder, for some
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One winter ago, Liliana Tapia had a young son, a closetful of unfulfilled dreams and not enough hours of work in a job at a local restaurant. A 2012 graduate of Tri-Cities High, she was living with her boyfriend in East Point and searching for opportunities when she came across an online listing for something called Year Up.

If she made the cut, the program offered six months of training, classes and college credits followed by a six-month internship at a local company, then a chance – a chance – of getting hired.

“I had to prioritize,” she said. “Either stay with Year Up and be something or stay with the hostess job and be nothing. I decided I had nothing to lose.”

She started in March, four-and-a-half days a week in Year Up’s downtown Atlanta classrooms. In late summer, she was placed in a Gas South call center.

“Business is like a language, a new language for me,” she said. “I see the call center as a stepping stone. This is a learning phase. I am not going to do this forever.”

Beyond the internship is a different trajectory than the one she had been on. She sees herself in a company, rising.

“When I was little, I loved soap operas and I saw people in suits and I became in love with suits. It’s being somebody in life.”

Maybe after graduation, she’ll be hired at Gas South or another local company, she said. “If I don’t have a job, I’ll be working hard at getting one. I am very good at that – working hard.”
There are many internships, some run by not-for-profit groups, some by individual companies. Some that pay, some do not. Most often they are aimed at students.

At their best, internships are two-way tryouts that benefit employer and intern: the company gets a motivated worker – on the cheap. The young person gets a firsthand, low-commitment look at life in the corporate world – along with a chance to get hired for good.

Year Up does pay a $175-a-week stipend, but it does not target students. Instead, the group aims at young Atlantans with little education and limited resources – but no lack of motivation. The idea is to offer what may be their first shot at a career when the odds are stacked against them.

The unemployment rate for job seekers between 16 and 19 years old is 22.2 percent, roughly three times the overall rate. For job seekers between 16 and 24, the most recently reported rate is 16.3 percent, and it's twice that high for African-Americans.

But not just anyone can get a leg up from Year Up. Belinda Stubblefield, executive director, said Year Up is aimed at “the middle of the bell curve,” not over-achievers who already have high odds of success, nor those with little chance of making it.

“You have to know if they have the driving motivation. We offer this to people who want to take advantage of the opportunity,” she said.

Year Up provides “an introduction to business communications,” Stubblefield said. “How to dress, how to respond to people – shaking hands, looking them in the eye. Just preparing them for what the real world will look for.”

Interns who do well have a shot at being hired, said Meredith Hodges, Gas South vice president. New employees at the Gas South call center receive at least $13.85 an hour, she said.

From the perspective of the company, internships are a sort of an extended, in-depth interview, Hodges said. A few months watching a potential employee lets a company avoid hiring mistakes, she said: If an employee doesn’t have the needed skills or temperament, it can be costly – as well as awkward. Year Up training seems to make candidates a better fit, Hodges said. “I believe the Year Up program helps mitigate those risks. I wish everybody we hired that is young could go through this class.”

Begun in Boston, the Year Up program has spread to a handful of other cities. In Atlanta, Year Up runs two programs a year, each with about 85 students. Participants take classes seven hours a day and a half-day on Wednesday that range from software to business writing to conflict resolution. After six months, they are eligible for an internship.

About a quarter of those who sign up do not get through the program, Stubblefield said.
Of those who do get through the training and internship, 85 percent are hired for full-time jobs within four months of graduation or are in college, Stubblefield said.

A little more than half of Year Up’s $4.8 million budget is paid by corporate sponsors, including Coca-Cola, Southern Co., Newell Rubbermaid, the American Cancer Society and AT&T, she said. The rest comes from philanthropies, individual donors and grants.

Year Up is one of the few internship programs not aimed at high school or college students.

Southwire Co. in Carrollton, for example, brings high school students in to work part-time, for which they are paid, in its factory.

At the college level, Georgia State University is constantly trying to link students with internships, said Colleen Perry, assistant director, cooperative education and internships. “We do know that employers are more likely to hire people who have been interns and they are more likely to hire from their own internship pool.”

INROADS, the nation’s largest not-for-profit internship program, has a four-decade history of focus on “underserved” populations, especially minorities, said Forest Harper, president and CEO. INROADS works with 60 large companies, among them Lockheed Martin, Kaiser Permanente and Target, Harper said.

St. Louis-based INROADS seeks applicants with a high grade point average, leadership abilities and community commitment, he said. About 13,000 students apply and just 1,700 end up in internships – including about 25 in the Atlanta area, he said.

When students complete their internships, Harper said. “They are job ready. The talented ones have multiple offers.”

One offer might be enough for 24-year-old Jomicka Green.

She sees Year Up as a chance to earn that one good offer. In the morning, she takes three buses and a train – a two-hour trip – from her home in Atlanta’s Old Fourth Ward to the Gas South call center in Marietta. She has to time everything right or she’s not there before her shift starts at 9 a.m.

“It is worth it,” Green said. “I don’t think I’d have this kind of experience without this program.”

She settles in her cubicle, adjusts her headset and starts a day of conversations with Gas South customers – more than 50 on a busy day.

It’s not a job, it’s less – and more: She’s an intern.