



Tyrie Dawson, a student in the Youth and Adult Automotive Training Center, works on a car's brakes in the training center.

Automotive Trainees See Silver Lining In Gloomy Economy

As Tyrie Dawson put the finishing touches on a brake job he had labored over intensely in a Newark garage, he dismissed the notion that the woes of the nation's automakers somehow spell bad news for him.

"No matter what, somebody is always going to need work on their car," said Dawson, 29, of Orange. "I just love getting my hands dirty."

Before becoming a student in the Youth and Adult Automotive Training Center, a program of New Community Corporation's Workforce Development Center, Dawson was stuck in a dead-end job at a giant do-it-yourself home retailer.

These days, Dawson's assignments are much more challenging, running the gamut from replacing car engines to performing wheel alignments and installing air conditioning systems. Since its founding in 1996, more than 300 students have graduated from the program, designed to train and educate at-risk individuals in basic automotive repair. It was the first center of its type in the country and served as a model for others that followed in cities like Chicago, New Orleans and Rockville, MD.

"In these hard economic times, they are taking these students and not only teaching them to think differently, but to take their automotive skills and translate them into something that can help generate income," said Marsha Saafir, who oversees the training centers for Ford Motor Co.

The students learn the trade and graduate with a Ford-backed certificate in auto maintenance and light repair. Bridget Kirk, who completed the program a year ago, was the only female member of her graduating class. She now holds a job inspecting and repairing railroad cars.

"It's very interesting," she said, adding she makes about \$12 an hour.

The program's \$6,000 tuition—less than half that of other automotive programs—is covered in large part by federal grants for low income students. And every penny is worth it.

"The satisfaction you get is that you are dramatically changing people's lives," said Richard Liebler, the former longtime owner of Hillside Auto Mall who started the program with New Community Corporation in remembrance of his son, who was killed in an automobile accident.

Ford Motor Co. invested millions initially in up-front equipment and financing costs and still supports the center.

"You've got to love doing this for a living," said 59-year-old instructor Edward Netherland, a veteran auto technician, who pours everything he knows into these students at a state-of-the-art training center on West Bigelow Street in Newark.

Among the businesses that have hired students after graduation are Hillside Auto Mall, Avis Rent a Car, Auto Land, Crestmont Toyota, Meineke Muffler, Sears Auto Centers, J & S Ford and Maplewood Tire. Some students, like Tarick Mack, have gone on to open their own shops.

"This is the highlight of my day," said DaJon McKoy, 25, a current student who is similarly upbeat about his future.

Applications for enrollment are now being taken. For more information, contact New Community Corporation's Workforce Development Center at 973 824-6484.