

Camden youths team up with disabled students

Kyle J Sullender, The Courier-Post 5:23 p.m. EDT June 15, 2016



(Photo: Provided)

PENNSAUKEN - The only things Danielle Koehler knew about places like Camden were what she learned on the evening news.

Koehler, 22, saw crime, poverty, and a city that has experienced [24 homicides already in 2016](http://preview.courierpostonline.com/story/news/crime/2016/06/08/camden-homicide-marks-first-june/85594598/) (<http://preview.courierpostonline.com/story/news/crime/2016/06/08/camden-homicide-marks-first-june/85594598/>).

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So she was apprehensive when she found out her summer honors group would be headed there to work with some of the city's troubled youth.

"When I first came here, I saw the old buildings and I was nervous," Koehler said.

Koehler, like the other nine people in her summer program, has an intellectual disability. She studies at The College of New Jersey in the Career and Community Standards program (CCS), a four-year liberal studies program that offers students with disabilities an opportunity to experience college, receive vocational training, and prepare to be a part of the adult world.

The summer honors program, an extra five-week session for highly motivated CCS students, started four weeks ago with the primary goal of connecting the students to the community. In order to do so, the honors students were teamed up with the Camden Youth Corps, a program for young adults in the Camden area who never finished high school.

It was the first time Koehler had traveled to Camden. She knew it would be the first time many in her group worked with students with disabilities.

The result was eye-opening.

"When I got here I was like, 'Wow, I was wrong,'" she said. "Everyone's just the same. It doesn't matter your background, everyone's just the same."

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Over the past four weeks the two groups have gotten together for various cleanup projects. On Wednesday, Koehler's group brought bags of clothes they'd collected in a clothing drive to a thrift store in Pennsauken that is operated almost entirely by the Youth Corps.

Together, they learned how to perform the duties of a retail job. They categorized items by size and gender, filled out tags with prices, put clothes on hangers and learned to work the register.

But retail wasn't the only thing they were learning, said 21-year-old Shanaya Panday. She said the Youth Corps taught her and her classmates about their experiences and their lives.

"You get a different perspective," she said.

But the Youth Corps wouldn't take all the credit.

"We're teaching them, they're teaching us, and we're all just learning together," said Dasyonia Fields, a 23-year-old member of Youth Corps.

Fields said working with the CCS students has helped her learn patience and compassion, while also helping her realize that the boundaries she thought existed between them were much thinner than imagined.

"I think that's the biggest thing, that our students like to teach others about disabilities," Academic Coordinator Bryana Bonfanti said. "It's just so amazing having two different populations from two different areas come together to complete a common goal."

The enthusiasm the CCS students brought to work day after day made an impact, 17-year-old Angel Lanuza said.

"I feed off their positive energy," he said.

JOB: Pet business offers jobs to those with special needs (<http://preview.courierpostonline.com/story/news/2016/03/16/south-jersey-pet-business-developmentally-disabled-adults/81822182/>)

"There are some days you come in in a bad mood, feeling negative," Fields said. "Whether it's raining or whatever, they come in positive and ready to go."

Many of the CCS students talked about how much they appreciated the opportunity to work with others and to give back to the community. All of them look forward to jobs in education, retail, or something else when they're finished the program.

Koehler encouraged others to get involved in their communities and to ignore the stereotypes plaguing the people of certain areas.

"I wish everyone was doing this, even in Camden and Newark," Koehler said. "They should look at this and say, 'Wow, these people are great for the community.'"

Next week the honors program will conclude with a trip to New York where the CCS students will get to see the United Nations building, Ellis Island, and other landmarks representing global partnership.

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