



Counting of the green: Career Center teaches value of a buck

By BOB AUDETTE, Reformer Staff
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BRATTLEBORO -- Developing a budget, managing credit cards and paying bills can be a challenge for lots of people who haven't lived with their parents for many years. Now imagine you're a college student, straight out of high school and on your own for the first time. You are inundated with offers for credit cards, trying to pay for your rent and groceries and making sure you haven't overestimated your ability to pay back college loans. Many high schools simply kick students out into the world to learn those lessons on their own, but at the Windham Regional Career Center, on the campus of Brattleboro Union High School, classes on banking, personal finances and the stock market are serious business.

"The business and financial services program is designed to provide kids with many different skills they are going to use later on in life," said Donna Rathbun, the branch manager and assistant vice president of Brattleboro Savings and Loan. "Not just in banking but also in work ethic skills. We also talk about money management and the importance of saving and maintaining good credit."

Not only did the program teach senior Katherine Derby the realities of personal finances, it also helped her win a \$100 savings bond. Last week, she was recognized by State Treasurer Jeb Spaulding as a statewide poster contest winner for a competition that challenged Vermont students to visually portray the theme, "Financial Responsibility Begins with Me." The contest was part of Financial Literacy for Youth Month, in which adults are urged to share their knowledge and skills with Vermont's youth to prepare them for their financial futures and to familiarize youth with the serious consequences that may be associated with a lack of understanding of personal finances.

"This contest presented a great opportunity to motivate kids to think about what they can be doing now to responsibly manage their money," said Spaulding.

"I entered the poster because it was a homework assignment for one of my business classes at the career center," said Derby. "My poster was very simple. It contained a picture of someone in a bank deciding if they should spend money at the mall or save it." With a laugh, Derby added "That's something I have to deal with a lot."

Derby participates in a school program that allows her to train and receive job experience as a student teller at the Brattleboro Savings and Loan branch at the career center. "We do your average teller work," she said, which includes handling deposits, withdrawals and loan payments. "It's great to connect what we learn about in the classroom with the real world. Working in the bank has helped Derby feel more confident in taking that big step into the big world. She hopes her experience at the bank will translate into a part-time job that can help her pay for college.

"I can go into some place confident that I have a reasonable shot at getting the job," she said.

In addition to learning how to manage her money, develop a budget and pay her bills, the career center business class has helped her to determine what funds she will need to complete her college degree and how best to pay off education loans after she graduates. She also learned about the temptations of credit cards and the pitfalls that await many college students who don't fully understand the financial realities of spending money you don't have.

"You need to have a grasp of what that means to your future," said Derby.

But that's not all she has learned at the career center. She has also learned about the stock market and how investors make or lose money there. And then there's what appears to be the little things, but can make all the difference when looking for work.

"We learned the proper business attire," said Derby. "It is very important so we don't go to a job interview in a sweatshirt and sweatpants."

This fall, Derby plans to attend Hartwick College in Oneonta, N.Y., where she hopes to major in something to do with finance, business or banking. There are eight students enrolled in the business and financial services program this year, said Rathbun, with more than 250 students passing through the program since it was initiated in 1990. Even though the school year is coming to a close, the students still have a little more to learn, she said. Before the last day of school, they will also have gained knowledge on how consumer lending works, what a good credit rating can do for you, how to get your first loan and the importance of paying your loans on time.

While the old BS&L branch was only open during the school year, the new branch, which opened when the ribbon was cut on the career center in 2006, is a full-service bank open year round. Fifty percent of the branch's customers are students, staff and faculty, said Rathbun, the other 50 percent are regular customers who take advantage of the branch's location near I-91 and Canal Street.

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