

United Way Provides the Building Blocks for a Good Life

Poverty, crime and persistent high unemployment are challenges for many people these days, but especially for teenagers living in the inner city. While many at-risk young people struggle to find their way, Dominick Guess is not among them. The 18-year-old Kansas City teenager is focused and determined. He has a plan that includes baseball, computers and graduating from college.

He credits his mother with instilling a sense of discipline and responsibility and teaching him that success comes to those who work hard and plan ahead. Although he didn't realize it until recently, United Way has also played a role in helping to shape Dominick's life.

His first encounter with United Way happened eight years ago when Dominick got involved with the RBI (Reviving Baseball in the Inner City) program. It is one of several programs at the Boys & Girls Clubs that receive funding from United Way under the category of youth development. Dominick fell in love with baseball and became very good at it. In fact he became so good that he earned a baseball scholarship to Maple Woods Community College where he is a freshman this year. Dominick says his high school didn't have a very strong baseball program and he never would have received a scholarship offer if the coaches at Maple Woods hadn't seen him excel in the RBI program.

Dominick's second encounter with United Way came last year, when he got involved in Urban Rangers, another program funded by United Way. Through Urban Rangers, Dominick got a minimum-wage, summer job scraping and painting houses, cutting grass, making trails and doing other odd jobs. In addition to providing a way to earn money, Urban Rangers helped Dominick establish a work history and gave him work-related references he could use in seeking future employment. One other thing that Urban Rangers did was to provide Dominick with financial education classes where he learned about budgeting, the power of compound interest and the pitfalls of easy credit.

During those financial education classes, provided in partnership with Catholic Charities of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Dominick heard about yet another United Way program called the Decade of Difference. It is a program designed to provide financial stability for at-risk 16- to 26-year-olds who want to continue their education, but can't afford the cost of college. Participants in Decade of Difference have an opportunity to open Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) that provide a 2-for-1 match for every dollar they save for tuition, books and other educational expenses, up to a maximum of \$6,000. Having gone through the Urban Rangers financial education classes, Dominick qualified to open an IDA. He quickly applied and was accepted into the program.

This past summer, Dominick landed a job as an intern with the Kansas City, Missouri Neighborhood Community Relations Department. Over the summer, he filed papers, made copies, cleaned out storage rooms and helped with taxi cab inspections. He also learned how to work in a business environment, about following directions, accepting responsibility and seeing jobs through to the end. Once again, he earned the minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour, but because he received a 2-for-1 match for every dollar he put away for college, the \$1,500 or so that he saved turned into more than \$4,500.

Dominick is excited about his future. He is majoring in computer science and would like to someday become a computer software designer. He still loves playing baseball and hopes he can play well enough at Maple Woods to earn a baseball scholarship to a four-year college, but he realizes that few people are good enough to play in the major leagues. Whatever he ends up doing after school there is no doubt that the real-world experience and life lessons Dominick gained through Decade of Difference, Urban Rangers and the Boys & Girls Clubs have provided him with the building blocks for a good life as well as a positive start on the road to success.



Dominick Guess is a freshman at Maple Woods Community College. He was the first Kansas City area teenager to open a college savings account that provides \$2 for every \$1 he saves towards college under United Way's Decade of Difference program.



Dominick is studying Computer Sciences and hopes to someday become a software designer. He says, "Anything is possible if we have the education and training to work with computers. Our future is linked to technology."