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Mesa woman gets life on track through Year Up

By Melody Birkett, Tribune Contributor Jun 26, 2018 Updated Jun 26, 2018



Odette Mimila of Mesa found help through a program called Year Up in getting her education back on track after she had a baby.

Melody Birkett/ Tribune Contributor

Odette Mimila is like a lot of East Valley students who graduate from high school. She enrolled at Mesa Community College and was off to a good start pursuing her education and career.

A year and a half later, she got pregnant.

Mimila took time off to spend time with her daughter. After a few months, she wanted to get back on track with her education but wasn't sure how to do that because she was a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals student. DACA gives young undocumented immigrants protection from deportation and a work permit.

On top of that, she was looking for a job and didn't know how she could afford college. Her brother heard about the Year Up program and together they went to an informational session.

"I really liked how the program was run and all of the opportunities and support it creates for students," Mimila said.

She enrolled in the one-year program last January. Classes are operated through Gateway Community College and are accelerated so students can earn as many as 30 credits, transferable to any university or community college.

Students choose from four course studies: cybersecurity, Java programming, IT help desk and business operations.

During the first six months of Year Up, students learn professional and career-development skills, such as how to properly shake hands, write a professional e-mail and resume and make eye contact, as well as the importance of arriving on time.

Classes are structured like a full-time job – 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday.

The second half of Year Up is an internship. Any student who completes the first six months earns an internship for the next six months, when they work with some of the largest global employers with an Arizona presence.

"With our partner companies, they get a chance to apply their skills in this critical work experience to help them prepare for the final phase, which is graduation from our program," said Kim Owens, executive director of Year Up, adding:

"At that point, they're ready to launch a career, they're ready to continue their education. These unemployed or underemployed young adults contribute to our community and to our economy. They're on this path to self sufficiency."

When Mimila finishes with the business-operations program, she'll need one more semester of classes to get a business associate degree.

"My major goal is to be an entrepreneur, and so with that, I want to continue my education and hopefully, soon enough, I'll get a doctorate," Mimila said.

She wants to set a good example for her daughter.

"Being able to do all of the goals I've set for myself will definitely benefit her and I'll be able to give her more opportunities than if I was not pursuing this," Mimila said.

Year Up was founded in 2000 in Boston and launched in Arizona in 2015. Since then, Year Up has served more than 530 Arizona young adults. Each semester, the program assists as many as 120 students, ages 18-24, who have a high school diploma or equivalent.

"Our mission is about empowering low-income young adults in their personal and professional lives through education and career," Owens said.

Most students don't have any out-of-pocket cost.

"We don't let financial need prohibit someone from being in the program," Owens said. "About 80 percent of students will qualify for some type of Pell Grant, federal financial aid.

"And those who don't, if there is assistance needed, Year Up has a generous funder base and we have the means to support and scholarship students who can't otherwise afford education. They'll pay for the college courses, but there's zero cost for Year Up and the support and the service we provide."

Year Up has a rigorous admission process and accepts only motivated students who fill out an application and go for an interview.

"At the interview, they ask you more about you and what obstacles are stopping you from pursuing a higher education," Mimila said.

Owens added, "As equally important as it is for them to know whether they have what it takes and whether they're ready for this program, we need to ensure they have what it takes for them to be successful."

“We call it grit. And we’re really looking at the ability for students to work hard, to know that opportunity is earned not given to you,” Owens said. “They have to work harder because of the situation that’s bringing them there.”

Mimila said that it’s about being prepared, motivated, doing what is necessary and wanting to complete the task for each day.

“For everyone of those students, we have employers lined up who want their talent, who are looking to bring them into their companies,” Owens said. “So, it’s opportunity and we become the brokers of that opportunity to help these young people who have the talent but lack the access, find the companies who have the jobs but lack the talent. It’s a perfect marriage.”

Year Up regularly receives positive feedback from employers about its interns.

Year Up is enrolling students for August and January classes. Information: yearup.org.