

Eager youngster learns problem-solving

Before the industrial revolution, young people learned a trade by becoming apprentices to experienced adults. Paid little or nothing, the apprentice observed and helped with simple or menial tasks. This on-the-job training was so invaluable that it has been adapted today. We call it interning. Formal programs exist in virtually all colleges and universities, many of which require students to complete at least one internship as a graduation requirement.

Some young people, however, don't wait until college. Elijah Ayers has been shadowing his uncle, Colin Kirby, for two years, learning the ins and outs of Kirby's job as resident director of the YMCA's Liberty Crossing Hampden Affordable Housing.

Elijah Ayers is 9 years old. "I've wanted to be a lawyer since I was 6," says Elijah, sitting confidently in his uncle's office, dressed neatly in a suit. "I want to stick to my dream. It's nice to see other



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parts of the city; to serve justice. I just want to get a good education and feel the happiness of helping other people."

Two years ago, Elijah used the last day of his spring vacation from Pioneer Valley Montessori School to "see what makes my uncle so smart." Packing an apple and a dictionary into a small briefcase, he rode with his uncle to the downtown YMCA, unlocked the office, and helped with the mail. Using his dictionary, he composed a reminder note to a

resident. He received a tour of the entire building, visiting all floors of Liberty Crossing as well as the locker rooms, gym and fitness center of the Y.

This year, he was ready for a bigger challenge. He particularly wanted to understand the legal issues residents might face. With his uncle, he travelled to housing court. He learned about the procedures involved when a resident does not meet his rental responsibilities: 14-day and



Elijah Ayers, 9, of Springfield, has been job shadowing his uncle, Colin Kirby, who is resident director of the YMCA's Liberty Crossing Hampden Affordable Housing, for two years.

30-day notices are given, and then a summary process letter is brought to the court.

Elijah called the sheriff to serve the notices. He also helped with some of the routine jobs in the office: checking in, collating forms, composing a move-in and move-out letter. He handed out rental applications to prospective tenants, showed a unit to one woman and toured the building with her.

"What my uncle does is problem-solving," Elijah says. "He tries to link people to different resources. It's difficult. You have to concen-

trate to understand the issue."

"We are investing in human capital," says Kirby. "By Elijah's coming here today, he's able to see different aspects of society and how it works. The YMCA is an especially valuable place for Elijah to come because it is

so diverse. "He's also learning the core values of the Y: caring, honesty, respect, and responsibility," continues Kirby. "We try to tap into issues and link them to services. Yes, tenants have a responsibility to pay their rent, and they may have to leave if they don't. But I have brought many people back in as well. It's not a dead end.

"My doors are always open," concludes Kirby. "I always ask, 'How can we solve the problem?'"

The YMCA of Greater Springfield was founded in 1852. Some 30,000 members and program participants are served annually in Springfield, Wilbraham and 11 surrounding cities and towns.

For more information on YMCA programs or how you can get involved, call 739-6951 (Springfield Branch) or 596-2749 (Scantico Valley Branch), or visit www.springfieldy.org