Lawrence Andrews, a 17-year-old high school senior, satisfied his desire to learn and engage with members and staff of all backgrounds during his work-study tenure in The Madison Cafe.

THE COMPANY IS THE CLASSROOM

Work-study programs allow high schoolers to develop skills before committing to a career

BY TODD NISSEN

Behind the counter at The Madison Cafe, three workers are moving quickly to keep up with the morning rush. On duty this morning are Sydney Marx, 19, and Madelyn Yax, 22. Both are certified baristas with prior experience.

Working with them is Lawrence Andrews. He's 17 and spent this past year as a senior at Loyola High School on Detroit's northwest side.

The DAC doesn't typically hire high school students. For one thing, they need weekday workers in the morning and early afternoon, when students are in class. It's also a place that requires a level of customer service from workers with a presence and maturity to know members' first names, remember whether they take cream in their coffee and project the sense of family that the DAC prides itself on.

And that's why Andrews is here—to watch, listen and learn. To experience how the staff and members go about their day in this portion of the grown-up world.

"I like to engage with people," he said. "That's why I picked the cafe, because it's a lot of interacting with different people."

Andrews is part of a work-study program the DAC has with Loyola High School and Cristo Rey High School, also in Detroit. He

is one of 61 Loyola students at 31 companies and organizations that the school partnered with this year, said Kimberly Jenkins, who directs Loyola's work experience program.

Each year, the DAC rotates two students through departments, from accounting and communications to front office, catering, athletics, engineering, food and beverage, purchasing and membership.

After his first year at the DAC, Andrews asked to come back to The Madison Cafe—to spend his senior year in an atmosphere where he could hone his people skills with the mix of members and others who come through, whether they are families with kids or senior citizens.

DAC staff has seen a change from the quiet and reserved version of Andrews who first showed up for work last fall.

"He's really opened up. It's been fun to see," said Connor Coyle, the DAC's member services manager.

It's the type of experience the Club hopes for and one that benefits everyone involved.

"There's something special in sharing knowledge and experiences with these young students and watching them develop new skills," said Beth Vernon, a DAC human resources generalist. "The Club benefits greatly, in that each of our mentors feels this same sense of purpose, and that leads to stronger employee engagement and job satisfaction.

"We are also developing a talent pipeline and gaining insight into the interests and talents of the next generation of workers."

Ancor CEO Jose Flores and Engagement and Partnership Manager Kyra Luyckx thank work-study student Izahir Moreno, center, for a job well-done.

TO BE ... OR NOT

Eighteen miles north, a similar scene is unfolding at Ancor in Troy. Once a week on Tuesdays over this past school year, 16-year-old Detroit Cristo Rey junior Izahir Moreno was driven from his home in southwest Detroit to an office and industrial complex off Big Beaver Road not far from I-75.

It was Moreno's second year at Ancor, a Tier 1 supplier of data management software and labeling products for automakers. Typically, Cristo Rey students change companies from year to year as part of its corporate work-study program. But Moreno, one of 280 students in this year's program, liked Ancor so much, he asked to stick with the company for a second year.

Moreno's experience has been one of those career-learning journeys that are helpful in unexpected ways. Like when you discover what you *don't* want to be when you grow up. Moreno initially had expressed an interest in learning development and coding. Then he spent time with Ancor's software innovation department.

"In his mind, Izahir liked coding. But in the real-life world, he didn't like coding," said Ancor CEO Jose Flores, a DAC member who is also on the Cristo Rey board.

It turns out that what captured Moreno's interest was making the assets that go into marketing. That included things like the videos, flyers and graphics Ancor uses for promotional purposes and on its social media channels. Then there was last

Work-study student Lawrence Andrews, center, gets a warm sendoff from his DAC colleagues at the conclusion of his Clubhouse assignment.

December's holiday video on LinkedIn about two Elves on the Shelf who make mischief with Ancor's label-printing machines.

"Izahir quite literally brought this video to life and did a great job directing to get the perfect shots," said Kyra Luyckx, Ancor's engagement and partnership manager.

Asked what advice he would give to a new student entering a work-study program, Moreno said don't be shy about speaking up.

"I would say communicate a lot with the people around you. Try to talk to as many people as you can, because who knows? They could be connections years from now."

Detroit Cristo Rey freshman Miriam Gallegos, second from right, spent the last year working with the DAC Human Resources team, including, from left, Sarah Nicholas, Beth Vernon and Grace Piche.

TOOLS TO TALK

Learning the value of communication is a regular theme in work-study programs. Immediate past DAC President Derron Sanders often shares the story of how he struggled with stuttering as a child. To help him become more comfortable with public speaking, he attended classes put on by Toastmasters International, the 100-year-old nonprofit dedicated to helping people learn communication, speaking and leadership skills.

As a result, Sanders makes sure that the work-study students who come to SG Cos., which he founded and where he is CEO, are enrolled in a Toastmasters program during their time at SG.

"I have personally experienced how important it is to have the right tools in the toolbox to effectively communicate and speak in public," said Sanders.

That goes for 17-year-old Khalil Kamau of Detroit. Kamau, who attended Loyola High School and spent his senior year with SG, said having to give speeches through the Toastmasters classes has provided him ways to get over the anxiety of speaking in public.

Khalil Kamau

"I get nervous when I speak in front of people, so it's helping me with that," he said.

Jolisa Warmack had the kind of work-study experience that cemented her career path. As a youngster, she liked legal dramas such as *Law and Order* and had visions of standing in a courtroom before a judge, advocating for others. After she spent time at an auto supplier and a utility company, Detroit Cristo Rey sent Warmack to the Kitch law firm in Detroit for her third year.

Jolisa Warmack

While she loved being around legal professionals, Warmack needed to know whether what she imagined as her future could be accomplished despite the schooling and grind that others had told her about. At a party for a retiring shareholder, she took a chance and buttonholed the senior attorney in an elevator. She asked point-blank whether the job was worth it, and would he do it all over again?

The attorney told Warmack that being a lawyer was not only a career he treasured but also something he felt destined to do. The moment stuck with her.

"It really resonated with me that I wasn't the only person who felt that calling," she said.

Warmack went on to be the first Cristo Rey alum to graduate from law school and pass the bar. She's now an associate in the litigation practice group at Burke, Warren, MacKay & Serritella in Chicago.

BUILDING FUTURE WORKERS

It's not only the students who are gaining insights from their time in the work world. The dozens of companies and organizations that participate with Cristo Rey and Loyola each year benefit in numerous ways.

Walbridge, one of the largest privately held construction companies in the U.S., has been involved with the Cristo Rey program for 10 years. For John Rakolta III, president and chief administrative officer of the Detroit-based company, work-study

With encouragement from DAC baristas Cole Dawkins, far left, and Madelyn Yax, far right, as well as Member Services Manager Connor Coyle, Lawrence Andrews completed both his two-year DAC tenure and his high school career this spring.

is an invaluable way to introduce high school students to the types of jobs that are in high demand throughout the building industry, from construction schedulers and project coordinators to electricians.

John Rakolta III

"Believe it or not, as you get further into major metropolitan areas, you'd be shocked at how a lot of kids don't know that this industry even exists," he said.

Just as millennials differ from those born in the Gen Z years, having young people at Walbridge also gives hiring managers and company leaders a preview of what the passions, interests and work expectations are of incoming generations of employees. At the same time, Walbridge is able to show students the different routes to a job. That can include vocational training, a two-year trade school or even working directly at the company out of high school while deciding whether they want to pursue a four-year college degree.

And then there is the issue of technology. Today's high school students grew up with smartphones, tablets and screens and bring their comfort with those devices to the office.

"Work-study students are often fluent in technologies and digital trends that can improve efficiency and engagement," said Mary Messana, vice president of corporate communications at Strategic Staffing Solutions, a Detroit company that has worked with Cristo Rey's work-study program since 2008.

Mary Messana

Launching a program does not have to be difficult, said Ancor's Flores. Ancor, which has fewer than 50 employees, signed up to host a student before having a formal plan but knowing it would be flexible enough to generate a meaningful experience.

In addition, the cost is not prohibitive. Ancor pays $9,300 a year per student to Detroit Cristo Rey—funds that help defray 50% of a student's high school tuition.

Work-study is growing in popularity as companies increasingly compete for employees with real-world skills and state legislatures do more to integrate work-based learning into high school graduation requirements. A 2024 study by the Center for American Progress found that 34 states and Washington, D.C., had enacted 80 laws connected to work-based learning at the secondary-school level. Michigan was one of those cited for having allocated funds to work-based learning programs or initiatives.

For its part, Detroit Cristo Rey has seen a change in how partner companies view the program. Instead of treating it primarily as a philanthropic exercise, employers treat the program as part of their larger efforts to build a diverse talent pipeline, said Brittany Lovin, the school's director of operations for corporate work-study .

The school has also made changes to ensure it is sending out students who are familiar with modern office tools. At the beginning of each school year, incoming freshmen get to the school three weeks ahead of the other grades so they can learn and get practice using the Microsoft Office suite of products.

As artificial intelligence and automation take on a bigger role in the workplace, preparing students with the skills in critical thinking, communication, adaptability and decision-making to be successful in those environments will become increasingly important, said Messana at S3.

"From S3's perspective, AI and automation are certainly influencing the way work gets done. But the workplace is not becoming less human. It's becoming more dynamic," she said.

"Students who understand how to balance technology with a critical eye, creativity and sound decision-making will be the ones who stand out."