

# Sunday Star-Ledger

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## BUSINESS SUNDAY

### For city kids, a way out



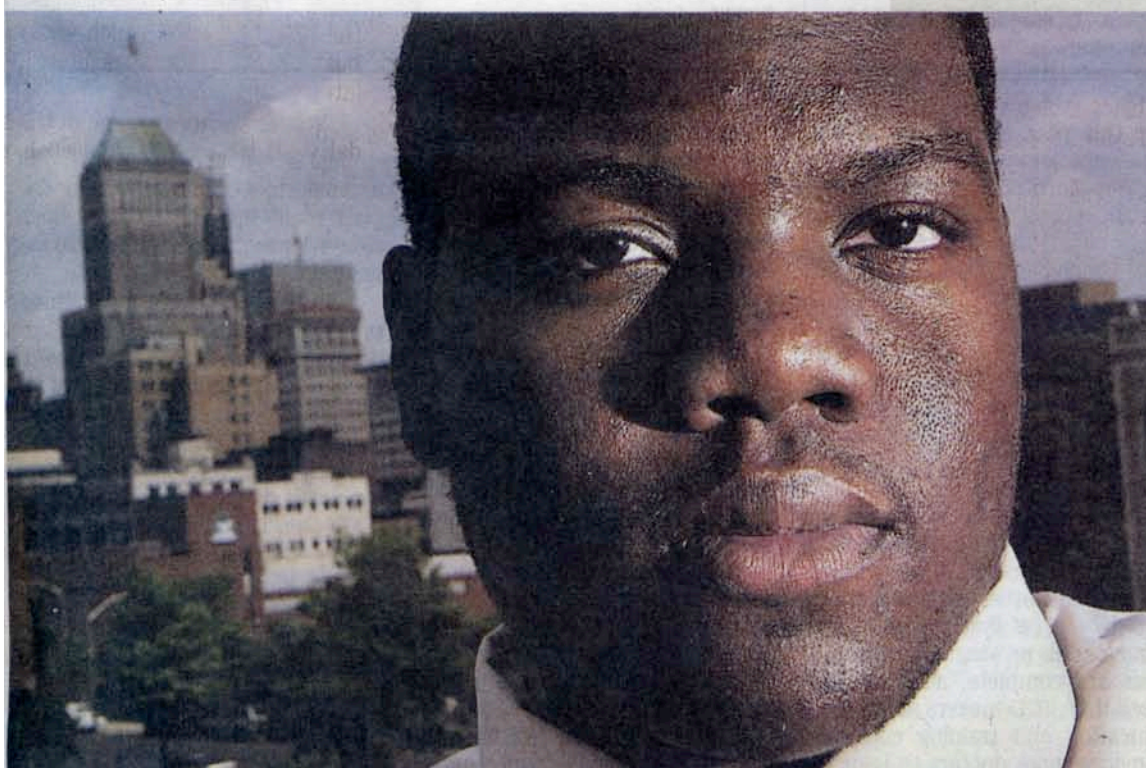
#### The interns

**ABOVE LEFT:** College junior Thkeya Smith works at insurance company MetLife in Bridgewater. (Photo by Ed Murray/The Star-Ledger)

**ABOVE:** Kahira Davis, 16, works on the Livingston campus of Prudential Financial in the disability management services department.

**BELOW:** Stephanie Torres, a senior at Bayonne High School, is working at Liberty View Capital Management in Hoboken.

**BELOW LEFT:** Yantay Kar, 17, is a senior at Arts High School in Newark. Kar works as an intern at Merrill Lynch's global private client complex in Newark. (Photo by Noah Addis/The Star-Ledger)



### Internships open doors for students

BY JOSEPH R. PERONE  
Star-Ledger Staff

As an eighth-grader, Thkeya Smith was appalled when a teacher conveyed her despair about life in the inner city.

Bitter about a recent divorce, the teacher told the children

they would never succeed because the odds were stacked against them, she said. Smith was so incensed, she wrote a poem: "You might have thought you broke me ... but

the only person that could stop me is me."

She still has that poem. And she still has the perseverance that has kept her in motion ever since.

At 17, Smith had enough drive to start her first corporate internship. Now a college junior, she is on her second internship, working this summer at insurance company MetLife in Bridgewater.

Her determination is typical of students from the Development School for Youth, a 14-week program for disadvantaged young people run by the nonprofit All Stars Project of Newark. Some of those high school students win internships at New Jersey corporations and a chance to crack the Fortune 500.

"These are young people who, despite the challenges of the inner city, have had the courage to succeed," said Bob MacBride, a vice president at Prudential Financial in Livingston. "Many of them have expressed interest in becoming teachers, doctors or lawyers."

During the past six years, 200 high school students have participated in the leadership training program for urban youths ages 16 to 21. Workshops led by senior executives and business professionals train them how to dress for the workplace, interview for a job, write a resume and speak in public.

This summer, more than 60 students received paid internships at more than two dozen New Jersey companies, including MetLife, Prudential and Merrill Lynch.

"Most high school students don't get this type of exposure," said Robert Ross, a Merrill Lynch vice president in Newark. "We're helping inner-city kids develop a connection between having a career and getting an education so they stay focused and remain in school."

It's also a form of grassroots recruiting for companies to enhance their diversity programs and give young people face time with top officers they

never would have met otherwise.

"A lot of these kids don't have networking capability," said Rick Meckler, chief executive of Liberty View Capital Management, a unit of Lehman Bros. in Hoboken. "Our thought was to give them the type of exposure with corporations that some suburban kids have."

Each intern has a mentor from the sponsor company who must learn how to develop motivated but raw talent.

"It allows us to get really good interns for the summer, and it's an excellent way for new managers to decide how to bring young people along," said Maria Morris, executive vice president of employee benefits sales for MetLife in Bridgewater."

Here is a look at four of the interns.

### **Thkeya Smith**

It would be an understatement to call Thkeya Smith an overachiever.

The Newark resident, whose first name is pronounced ta-KEY-a, carries a double major at Kean University, studying criminal justice and general business with a minor in psychology. She has a 3.2 grade-point average.

"Everyone tells me I'm crazy because I have a dual major and minor," she said.

Her first internship was at Martindale Hubbell in New Providence when she was a student at Essex County Vocational High School. At MetLife's Bridgewater campus, Smith is part of a team that supports the national accounts division, which provides group insurance to large employers with more than 25,000 workers.

When she first arrived, she had to become familiar with the company's vernacular. She

remembers hearing employees talk about STDs and wondered why they were interested in communicable diseases.

"I found out that STD stands for short-term disability," she said. "I had to keep asking, 'What does that mean?' whenever an unfamiliar term came up. So, they gave me a training manual to study, and that helped."

She also learned how to network, how to be part of a team and how to overcome frustration when working on a project. Smith is moving data to a different software program to make it easy to re-view customer information.

Her goal is to work full-time at MetLife and start her own company when she turns 35.

"I want to have a company that provides insurance benefits for people who don't have them," she said. "I love when people are passionate about things, and I am passionate about being an entrepreneur."

### **Yantay Kar**

Yantay Kar, a 17-year-old senior at Arts High School in Newark, is discovering not all millionaires are alike.

As an intern at Merrill Lynch's global private client complex in Newark, he learned wealthy people want high returns on their investment.

"It's amazing because I thought millionaires put their money in a Swiss bank account," Kar said. "But they come to Merrill Lynch to increase their money. It's cool."

He also shattered some misconceptions about the stock market.

"Just because one company's shares are worth \$80 and another's are worth \$40, that doesn't mean the \$80 stock is a better company," he said.

"When I was younger, I didn't know small companies could sell shares. But now I know

even small companies have stock."

Kar said the toughest challenge about growing up in the inner city is staying focused.

"You have a lot of outside interference -- drugs and people on the street corner every day," he said. "You see things going on that shouldn't be going on and a lot of violence, too."

Kar stays in the zone by choosing the right friends, competing on the track team and playing guitar, cello and violin. Handling financial instruments is no different than strumming a guitar, he said.

"In music, you have to know exactly what strings to hit and where to play from to have a good sound," he said. "At Merrill Lynch, you also have to know what you're doing to your clients' money to progress."

### **Kahira Davis**

At age 16, Kahira Davis is on a journey that already has taken her to Hungary and back.

Two years ago, she stayed with a family in that country as an exchange student with the American Field Service. She learned how to speak the language and how to manage the currency so she wouldn't run out of money.

Davis traveled overseas for free because she won a scholarship for academic achievement. The honor roll student earned A's and B's at the Technical Career Center in Newark.

She tries to encourage other students to travel abroad. "A lot of black and Latino students don't take advantage of this program, and I try to convince them to take the risk," she said.

This summer, Davis is on the Livingston campus of Prudential Financial, earning \$12 an hour like the other interns. She works in the disability management services department,

contacting doctors and long-term disability patients to request documents.

"I learned how to be organized, how to schedule appointments and how to follow through on phone calls," she said.

Davis hopes to study chemistry in college and one day become a forensic scientist. To do that, she stays away from trouble.

"I don't smoke, drink or do drugs, and I don't hang out in the streets," she said. "I have my head on my shoulders because I was taught the right things to do."

Her advice to young people who want to make it in the corporate world: "You can't slack off and be lazy," she said. "If you want something, you've got to go for it."

### **Stephanie Torres**

Stephanie Torres, a senior at Bayonne High School, yearns for a career in law or politics.

But this summer, the youngest of six children is working at

Liberty View Capital Management, a Hoboken money manager.

"I had to learn how to do reports and make sure the numbers match up on dividends that clients get for year-end tax purposes," she said.

The internship has provided her with a broad set of skills in operations, accounting and finance.

"I get to experience something most kids don't at this age," Torres said. "I liked meeting corporate executives and having a conversation with them. That was pretty cool, and I'm only 17."

Torres is vice president of the student council, and she performs for three school singing groups.

"I just want to make an impact on people's lives, whether it's entertaining them or working in a corporate environment," she said. "If I want to work for Liberty or a hedge fund some day, at least now I have the confidence to do it."

#### **THE PROGRAM**

The Development School for Youth is a leadership training program sponsored by the Newark-based All Stars Project New Jersey. Since 2000, about 200 high school students, ages 16-21, from Newark, East Orange, Irvington and other urban communities, have participated in the 14-week program.

The core component of the program is a 14-week series of workshops, led by senior executives and business professionals, which introduces young people to the corporate world and provides training in dressing professionally, interviewing for a job, public speaking, résumé writing, developing interpersonal skills, etc.

Each summer, program graduates are placed in paid summer internships at companies such as MetLife, Prudential and Merrill Lynch. This summer, more than 60 program grads interned at 30 New Jersey companies.

The All Stars Project partners with the private sector — philanthropists and foundations — to bring outside-of-school educational opportunities to thousands of inner-city youths in Newark and New York City. Its youth programs, which employ a performance-based approach to development, include the All Stars Talent Show Network and the Development School for Youth.

For more information or to get involved, call Gloria Strickland, director of the All Stars Project New Jersey, at (973) 622-5506. The All Stars can be found on the Web at [www.allstars.org](http://www.allstars.org).

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