PRODIGY COFFEEHOUSE EMPOWERS “OUR CITY’S NEXT GREAT"

BY S.E. FLEENOR

PRODIGY COFFEEHOUSE OPENED ITS DOORS in July of 2016 in Denver’s Elyria-Swansea neighborhood. Since that time, the innovative social enterprise has engaged over twenty young adults in “building a foundation for success in whatever career they want to go into,” according to Stephanie Frances, founder and executive director of Prodigy.

The coffee shop is unique in that it pairs a non-profit mission with an enterprise aimed at profit — a type of business-non-profit hybrid called social enterprise that emphasizes the social impact of an organization alongside profits and financial stability. “We’re a craft coffeehouse and apprenticeship for young adults in Denver who are not finding success in traditional school or work structures,” explained Frances.

Prodigy provides a paid apprenticeship and on-the-job training to their employees. “Our city’s next great contributors are already here in some of these young people that are being overlooked or that are on the margins,” said Frances.

Apprentices who work at Prodigy come from the surrounding neighborhoods, which have been historically underserved. Fifty percent of apprentices have experienced homelessness and all have struggled in traditional educational and professional settings. The year-long apprenticeship program is open to 18 to 24-year-olds who are interested in learning while they earn.

Data from the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics makes the case for meaningful youth employment even more clear.

The next generation of leaders is currently more likely to be unemployed than their older peers. According to the data, 18 and 19-year-olds in particular experience a high rate of unemployment. In the third quarter of 2017, over 12 percent of all 18 to 19-year-olds experienced unemployment compared to an overall unemployment rate of 4.4 percent. That number spikes along racial or ethnic identities. Almost 25 percent of Black or African American youth in the same age group are unemployed, while just under 14 percent of Hispanic or Latino 18 to 19-year-olds are unemployed.

Unemployment is one of the key issues Prodigy aims to address, not just through giving young adults jobs but also by preparing them for their future.

“T he word prodigy [means] a young person endowed with exceptional abilities. We believe that all young people have exceptional abilities, and it’s our job, it’s our role as educators and employers, to create spaces that activate that talent and those exceptional abilities,” said Frances.

At the beginning of each cohort’s apprenticeship, Prodigy centers the young adults’ perspectives and needs, empowering apprentices to shape and develop their own environment. “They’re totally and wholly invested in creating their workplace culture, instead of being taught it,” said Frances. Each cohort starts with a two-week, paid intensive pre-apprenticeship. During this time, participants get a chance to feel out the program and see if Prodigy is somewhere they’d like to work.

Additionally, the group collaborates to develop their own mission and employee handbook. The most recent group’s customer service experience statement, which is included in their handbook, states: “At Prodigy, we want you to feel like it’s a holiday every day where you’re surrounded by seahorses and butterflies land on your nose.”

Frances, whose background is in youth career development and teaching in alternative schools, believes the workplace is an ideal learning environment, particularly for youth who might struggle in traditional educational settings. The fast pace of a café paired with ample support allows apprentices to iterate, a term which refers to repeating the same task multiple times. At Prodigy, apprentices continually engage in this process. “We learn a concept. We practice it on a customer. We debrief and reflect on how that went and then the next customer is in line and we get to rapidly iterate,” said Frances. Iteration encourages apprentices to recover from mistakes quickly and gain mastery over a new concept.

Robert Abeyta participated in Prodigy’s first cohort of apprentices that started working the day the café opened its doors. He was simply looking for employment and stumbled upon the apprenticeship. Abeyta recalled being skeptical of the process, but found he really enjoyed the program and learned a lot. One of the things Abeyta appreciates most about the apprenticeship is the support he gets from staff not only for his work, but also for his life beyond the workplace.

“It’s not like you just work here and that’s it,” said Abeyta. He is particularly grateful for the support with his pursuit of further education.

Since completing his own apprenticeship, Abeyta has stayed on to support subsequent cohorts. He now serves as a shift leader and provides much of the on-the-job training to the newest group of apprentices. This is his first time serving in a leadership role and he has found the experience to be both “weird” and “cool.”

According to Abeyta, “[Being a leader] lets me see the process that it takes to learn and I remember what it’s like to learn something for the first time again.”

The apprenticeship focuses on developing skills that will benefit each apprentice in whatever career they pursue. Frances said, “They’re learning how to dial in an espresso machine, but [they’re] also looking at…transferable skills.”

In fact, at one of their trainings, the apprentices play a matching game to help them identify how their skills will translate. They brainstorm a list of skills they are learning and a list of careers they know about. Then apprentices draw one of each at random and have to figure out how the skills they have already learned apply to that career.

Prodigy is just getting started. “Our goal is to be fully self-sufficient within five years,” said Frances. Self-sufficiency would mean covering all business and program expenses with revenue earned by the coffeehouse. In the first year of operation, they are already covering 70 percent of expenses incurred.

After completing the apprenticeship, former apprentices have been entering all types of fields, including high-end coffee shops, working at a salon, and studying engineering in college. While some apprentices have been unable or unwilling to finish the program, Prodigy maintains an open arm policy and welcomes them to return at a later time.

Whatever path they choose, Frances maintains a focus on equipping them to “have an opportunity to compete in a workforce and in an employment world that might not be set up for equity.”