

Students Scope out Job Opportunities at MCS Career and College Expo

By Jane Roberts

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To understand Willie Slate's joy, it's important to know what has been waking her up in the middle of the night -- a fear that dozens of employers she lined up for the Memphis City Schools' first career and college expo wouldn't show.

They did. And over the course of Thursday and Friday, about 5,000 juniors and seniors from every city high school filed by the booths at the Memphis Cook Convention Center, trying to put a happy face on futures they're launching in perhaps the worst economy in nearly four generations.

"We have 122 exhibitors; 26 of them are colleges," Slate said, stealing a few minutes from the press of students dressed to sell themselves.

Slate is executive director of career, technical and adult education. That includes traditional courses -- cosmetology, computer repair and law enforcement -- and others such as forensics and shoe repair, which now includes orthopedic work, she says, hunting down the booth sponsored by Snells-Hanger Orthotics and Prosthetics.

"We wanted to create a rich experience for both the technical/career side and the academic side," she said.

The message, implicit and otherwise, is that no genie jumps out of the bottle with jobs these days, when conventional wisdom says it takes a master's degree to get in the door.

Students stayed for about 2 1/2 hours, taking in workshops on how to apply for 2,000 summer youth jobs, thanks to the new stimulus bill, and meeting industry leaders such as Tracie Woods, vice president of workforce development at First Tennessee. Woods taught one of a handful of mandatory workshops in preparing for interviews, writing résumés and succeeding in the larger picture.

But the expo floor itself was where futures tended to take root. The Regional Chamber of Commerce emphasized the growing job opportunities in Memphis, listing salaries in each, including \$21,154 per hour for huge recording stars and \$59 per hour for biochemists and biophysicists, the top tier in the city's emerging biotech work force.

"This is where Memphis is going to be. We want to catch these kids and encourage them to stay in their hometown. That's what it's all about," said Clifford Stockton, senior logistics and policy adviser.

Northside senior Elisa Williams needed to submit letters of recommendation for her application to Lane College in Jackson.

"I turned them in (Friday) at the booth," she said, marveling at how quickly a laptop computer and access to key people could work in her favor.

A knot of students, including Antonio Lewis, 17, crowded around the FedEx booth, where human resources expert Robenette Scott was handing out fliers on \$11-per-hour hub openings and making mental notes about names.

Lewis plans to study for his EMT license at Southwest Tennessee Community College while working nights at the hub -- a trajectory as common in Memphis as the planes flying overhead.

It wasn't long before Scott was writing her name and office number in Lewis's day planner and promising she'd remember him.

"The smartest thing he did was strike up a conversation," Scott said. "The second smartest thing is having a plan. Let me tell you, he will have no problem at all getting in and moving up at FedEx."

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