What We Inherit, What We Build Together: A Berkshire Blueprint for the Future

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This year, my grandmother began passing down stories of her childhood, connecting me more deeply to a lineage of women who designed futures beyond what was available to them. I learned that my great-great-grandmother moved her family from a small village on Mexico's eastern coast to Mexico City so her daughters could pursue high school and postsecondary education. She opened a bakery, spent her nights knitting sweaters for department stores, and made sure every one of her children had a career. Her determination shaped opportunities for generations of our family, including my own, and reminded me how much of what we become is made possible by those who came before us.

At my desk, I have a sticky note taped to my computer that I scribbled during college: Ubuntu, a word from the Bantu languages of Southern Africa that speaks to our shared humanity and interconnectedness, often translated as "I am because you are." I've carried that understanding into the last 18 months of learning from the incredible people who've welcomed me into the Berkshire community, shared their stories, and opened their businesses and workplaces to me. This year, I had the privilege of joining the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board and Career Center to lead the development of a regional Jobs4Youth network, bringing employers, educators, and civic leaders together to create paid opportunities for young people and build on generations of investment in our local workforce. Through this work, I've come to recognize the same determination that shaped my family's story in the grit, wisdom, and collective spirit of the Berkshires. There are more people to thank than I could ever fit into this article, but I hope to honor their contributions by carrying forward what they've built. Just as my great-great-grandmother created opportunities for generations she would never meet, we have the opportunity to continue shaping an economy where the people who come after us can imagine and build futures of their own.

For decades, this same belief has taken shape through the patient work of Berkshire educators, workforce professionals, and employers. Long before Jobs4Youth, one workforce coordinator traveled between high schools, building relationships that helped students enter their first workplaces. North Adams Public Schools and MassHire later developed a school-based approach to career readiness, and other districts adapted that work around the students and employers they knew. Today, in partnership with MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board all 11 Berkshire school districts have teams and longstanding career readiness models connecting education with work, reaching hundreds of students each year. Behind that growth are years of teachers taking calls, counselors learning what excites a student, and employers making room for someone to learn. What seems ordinary in the moment becomes a community's capacity to create opportunity.

That commitment runs through McCann Technical School and Taconic High School, where technical education connects students with local industries. Charles H. McCann learned his trade alongside his father at Sprague Electric and went on to champion vocational learning. Berkshire Community College and MCLA extend opportunities for further education, while the MassHire Career Center supports people as their circumstances evolve. A student may discover a trade, begin paid work, and return years later to learn something new. Along the way, relationships help them choose their direction and give local businesses an opportunity to develop and retain talent.

That inheritance shaped how we approached this summer's Jobs4Youth Pilot. More than 100 conversations with local businesses had given us insight into their hiring cycles, workforce needs, and the opportunities they saw for young people. We connected that knowledge with educators' understanding of their students and the relationships cultivated by the Career Center, mayors, chambers, and community partners. Through worksite visits and ongoing collaboration, we shaped opportunities around the realities of local businesses while supporting young people through their preparation, interviews, and practical needs, including work permits and transportation. Staying alongside employers and young people throughout the process allowed us to strengthen relationships that could continue creating opportunities beyond the summer.

Together, we engaged 43 employers and secured 46 paid positions across 17 companies; 13 young adults started work this summer. Fourteen of those companies were new to funding youth employment, expanding the circle of businesses investing in future talent. I'm deeply grateful to Bagel & Brew, Zucchini's Restaurant, WANDER Berkshires, Ethos Pathways, Porches Inn, Evergreen Education, and the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board for participating in this pilot, funded by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development. Each commitment represents people making room for someone else's future and creating relationships that can keep growing.

What we've learned here can be adapted and repeated elsewhere, beginning with what each community has inherited: the people, institutions, and industries already invested in its future. Schools know their students, employers understand the work and skills their businesses need, and workforce partners help connect learning with opportunity across a person's working life. Organizing that knowledge around shared priorities allows each partner to reinforce the others and relationships to grow beyond a single program or summer. The blueprint is to recognize those existing strengths, connect them with purpose, and trust the people closest to the work to shape an approach that reflects their community. When local agency is directed toward the collective good, what one generation has built becomes a foundation for the next.

It is often difficult for us to see the long-term impact of the decisions we make today. I think that's what makes our commitment to the future workforce of our county that much more powerful. It is saying what my great-great-grandmother speaks to me through the lives of my great-grandmother, my grandmother, and my own mother: that the opportunities we create for one another today become the foundation from which future generations can imagine and build lives of their own. The young people we're investing in are the future of the Berkshires, and the future we share depends on what we continue to make possible for one another. May we carry forward the same spirit of possibility and collective care that brought us here, building together a future greater than any one of us could imagine alone.