

CARLOS ALFONSO

SoBRO SUCCESS STORY – YOUTH EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT



With high school graduation drawing near, Carlos Alfonso wasn't sure what he wanted to do. He had moved to the United States from Venezuela four years before with his mom and sister. His interest in cars and mechanics' work was waning; so after Myoshi Primo visited his school, Morris High School, in the Morrisania section of the Bronx to find students for a SoBRO Tec, a technology and design youth program funded by the National Science Foundation, Carlos decided to enroll.

"SoBRO, to me, was like a big step in my life...a different way to go, another road." Carlos learned to use 3D rendering programs to design cityscapes and other images. SoBRO Tec gave him a new passion for drawing and creative design, one he took with him to college where he studies multimedia programming and design.

A SoBRO Tec class visit to the Google offices late in 2007 cemented Carlos' determination to follow this new path. "It was so impressive, all of the technology they had...that's the kind of life I want, that's the kind of life I want, that's why I am working so hard for it."

Now Carlos, attending college with the help of a stipend the SoBRO Tec staff secured for him, also works freelance for video game designers in his free time. He still uses the images he made at SoBRO for his work samples, and has built off of the computer skills first taught to him right here at SoBRO.

"He's a quick learner," according to Myoshi Primo, one of Carlos' instructors in SoBRO Tec. "He learned English in one year!" While his accomplishments are due to his hard work, Carlos is sure to give SoBRO Tec credit, too: "It gave me another way of looking at life more creatively...without that motivation, I would not have gotten so far."

CHANEL THORNTON

SoBRO SUCCESS STORY – YOUTH EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT



At age 15, Chanel Thornton dropped out of school. Eight years later, at age 24, she enrolled in the SoBRO Youth-Build program. Her three children were in foster care, and she had little hope of getting them back without a job or stable home. Now, three years after first entering SoBRO, Chanel is the founder of her own nonprofit housing organization and lives in a new apartment with her three children. "It really started here," says Chanel. "Without SoBRO, I would not have made it."

After dropping out of school and drifting from foster care to the streets, her longing for her kids motivated Chanel to action; walking into the SoBRO Center was her first small step. Test scores indicated that she didn't need to take a GED prep course, but still she lacked the confidence to take the actual test. That's when a flyer caught her attention. The flyer was advertising the YouthBuild program, which caters to 16-24 year olds that are out of school and, for the most part, on the streets by providing on the job construction training and GED prep courses.

Chanel was 24, the upper age limit for YouthBuild participants, so she became a leader for the younger students. With the help of Maurice Good, the SoBRO YouthBuild coordinator, Chanel excelled in the program. "She was one of the best construction trainees in her class, male or female," according to Mr. Good.

"Things started to look up but I was still without housing, I still didn't have a job," Chanel says of her early time in YouthBuild. Her desire to reclaim her children made Chanel anxious for results, but before she even completed the ten month YouthBuild program, Chanel accepted a job right here at SoBRO.

Chanel had enrolled in SoBRO's Job Readiness Program, where the program directors offered her a job as an Employment Specialist. Chanel was responsible for placing in jobs dozens of individuals who were dealing with the same problems that she was just months before.

Within months of getting a job at SoBRO in 2006, SoBRO staff helped Chanel to find an apartment. Shortly after, in 2007, she was finally reunited with her three children.

CHANEL THORNTON

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After switching jobs to work for a SoBRO partner organization, Chanel returned in early 2008 to work with yet another SoBRO department, the Entrepreneurial Development program. There, SoBRO staff helped Chanel work through all of the problems that face someone starting their own business, and in July of 2008, Chanel's dream project, House of Jasmin, which helps young underserved families to find jobs and housing, was officially incorporated.

With the help of SoBRO, Chanel has made enormous strides from her time on the streets. It was a journey, she says, that she wouldn't trade for anything. And now, she is "living with her three kids, and [she] wouldn't have it any other way." SoBRO is proud to have made the journey with her.

JOSE TAVAREZ

SoBRO SUCCESS STORY – ADULT EDUCATION

When asked why he received an award for teaching health literacy from the Mayor's Office, Jose Tavares smiles. "I was the lone voice of dissent," he explains. When SoBRO staff first met with representatives of the Mayor's Office who were pushing their health literacy initiative, Jose was doubtful. "You're telling these people that they need to buy fruits and vegetables when they've only got \$2 for dinner? It's not going to work."

But they persuaded him to try, and even he was impressed by the results. "I have to admit," says Jose. "It worked very well."

SoBRO was one of the few pioneers for the health literacy campaign initiative by the Mayor's Office in 2007. Our health screening days and implementation of the curriculum have been celebrated as phenomenal successes by the Mayor's Office.

Jose won his award for integrating health lessons into his Adult Basic Education classes, courses geared toward individuals with low levels of literacy, such as recent arrivals to the U.S. Even with the small push for health literacy education that the first years of the program has entailed, he has noticed significant changes in his students' behavior. For example, juice and water bottles started to show up among the sea of Coca Cola bottles that his students bring to class. He also convinced students that 2% milk, with its significant drop in fat, is not as hard of a change to make as skim milk, as even he found it possible to give up his beloved whole milk. "Small steps can get you further than trying to make this big leap," Jose says.

Teachers with such a keen understanding of and identification with their students are crucial to the success of the education programs at SoBRO. We join the Mayor's Office in congratulating Jose and our other instructors for their commitment to education, and look forward to watching their future success unfold.





Students at Crotona Academy in the South Bronx often come from the most challenging circumstances: low-income, under-educated and aging out of school, their prospects for achievement without the special help provided at Crotona are very dim.

One such student, Maritza Velez, was on a path that reflects the low expectations that these students have. She was losing interest in school and, at age 18, gave birth to a child. It was a “very bad and depressing moment,” for Maritza, she says. “Nothing really mattered.” But then a SoBRO youth advocate introduced the students at

Crotona to the Learning to Work program, which gets students paying jobs and gets them interested in school again. “When I went in to SoBRO, everything changed,” says Maritza, who entered the program at age 16. “They helped me so much.”

One of the most significant impacts the SoBRO programs had on Maritza was the motivation they provided to excel in school. The students at Crotona, she says, loved going to the “happy place” after school that SoBRO provided. “There were certain standards you had to meet to be able to participate in it,” she notes, and so getting to that happy place demanded that students excel in school. And “from there, I just went on to graduation,” she says.

The personal care that SoBRO staff provided Maritza also had a huge impact on her. “I’ve struggled a lot throughout my life, and I always ran to [SoBRO Youth Advocate Rachel Saler] first to let her know what I was going through and she always gave me the most positive feedback and the best advice.” Another SoBRO staffer, Brenda Veal, was like a mother to Maritza, she says, at a time when she didn’t have any family of her own to depend on. “I could just tell her anything,” says Maritza.

Eva Lopez, another SoBRO employee close to Maritza, chose her to attend the Powershift Conference in Washington, D.C. She was astonished to watch this normally shy young girl with a swollen, pregnant belly debate with Republican staffers on Capitol Hill. “No one ever really thinks that the young kids really have a say in anything, but I’m trying to make it clear that we have a big voice,” says Maritza. She normally vents her feelings through song and poetry, she says, and Powershift gave her the first chance to articulate them to someone in power.

When she had her daughter at 18, SoBRO staff was there again, accompanying her to appointments to help her overcome what she calls her shyness.

Martiza has far surpassed the expectations that she and others had for herself only a few years ago. Now her answer to the question of whether she’s going to college is “of course,” a long way from the 16 year old on the verge of dropping out of high school. Now, at 19, she will be the first member of her family to go on to college. As always, Martiza’s success came from her own motivation to improve her life, but she acknowledges that she could not have done it alone: “Once I got in to SoBRO, I just realized that I had so much help and people actually cared for me and were willing to help...if I had the chance to do it all over again, I’d go right back to SoBRO.”

Fitz Octeave has worked on cars for more than 42 years. When he was a boy in St. Lucia, an island in the Caribbean, he began working in a car shop after school at age 10. Twenty years later, he joined his sister to live in the United States and continued to work in various garages for the next twenty years. In 2006, he decided to open his own. Working with cars, Fitz says, “is in [his] blood.” But running a business is not. To learn how, he came to SoBRO.



SoBRO’s Entrepreneurship Development Director, Garrett Lucien (Fitz: “Garrett is my main man”), was shocked, as many people are, to learn the Fitz is legally blind. “I wondered how he was going to make it,” Lucien recalls. But Fitz dispelled all doubts on his end: “When I saw the work, the craftsmanship,” Lucien says, he knew Fitz could make it. So they got to work drafting a business plan, a marketing plan, and securing loans needed to start up the shop. “They taught me the basics,” says Fitz, and then “they walked me through the whole process...Without SoBRO, I probably wouldn’t be able to manage to do all the things I can do today.”

After approaching SoBRO in earlier in the year, FGO Motor Services opened in the Park Stratton section of the Bronx in December 2006, and business was good. The Daily News even wrote an article on Fitz and his business in April of 2007.

“SoBRO is a good organization,” says Fitz. “If you listen to them and do what they say to do, the knowledge that they give you is very good. You will be successful, just like me.”

In the Bronx’s Community District 1, where most SoBRO program participants live, unemployment reaches a staggering 23.5%. Getting residents back to work so they can support themselves and their families is crucial to the quality of life in our community, and our Job Placement Services address this pressing need. SoBRO maintains relationships with hundreds of New York-area businesses that hire program graduates. Our relationship with these businesses informs our training programs to ensure that our services are relevant to the workforce needs of businesses. SoBRO staff helps to arrange job interviews and to prepare individuals for these interviews. Here are a few testimonials from graduates and community partners that have experienced the impact SoBRO job training can have:

“SoBRO’s Employment Services Unit provided me with the professional skills to secure employment. The programs enhanced my attitude about the world of work. My pursuit started as a single parent of two with limited skills. While at SoBRO, I completed Prep GED, Basic Computer Application, and the Job Readiness Workshop. I subsequently got a job as a Clerical Assistant. Today, I am the Senior Administrative Assistant at one of the largest Social Services agencies in the Bronx. Without SoBRO’s assistance and guidance, I would not have had the opportunity to better myself and be an asset to my employer.”

PRINCESS ALEXANDER

Senior Administrative Assistant
Mid-Bronx Senior Citizens Council

“It has been a great pleasure working with the team at SoBRO’s Employment Services Unit. It’s great because you work with people who truly understand an employer’s need to hire the right candidate for a particular position. The team at SoBRO went the extra mile to ensure they met our recruitment needs. The thorough screening and constant feedback and follow-up sessions helped us save valuable time and unnecessary hassles in hiring the wrong person. Working with SoBRO has been a win-win solution.”

DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES

Creative Lifestyles, Inc.

At the end of each cycle of courses, Adult Education students are asked to write a reflection on their experience at SoBRO. These courses yield extraordinary results: in the last fiscal year, 57% of GED, ESL and ABE students advanced at least one educational level. New York State standards only mandate that 37% of students achieve such a result, so it is no wonder that students have such overwhelmingly positive things to say about our their time at SoBRO. Here are just a few examples of what 2008 graduates had to say:

YOLANDA NFOÑO, ESL STUDENT

"When I came I didn't know anything but now with the help of my beautiful teacher Ms. Marquez I learned a lot." "SoBRO help (sic) me to get a job, to take the test in Hostos [Community College] and I'll start my college in August." "I can say SoBRO is the best program to learn English."

DIABIRA MALAMINE, ESL AND CIVICS STUDENT

"When I come in this country, I didn't want to speak with the people in the street because I can not speak in English...now if I'm lost or I want information in the street, I ask other people. If my uncle need help for the medicine, I can help now... Before I can not help the children...now if they need help, I can help."

FRANCISCO NUNEZ, ESL AND CIVICS STUDENT

"When I began this class my English was very bad because I didn't understand."

But now, "I passed the exam of the citizenship because I studied hard every question of the history of the United States...today I speak with my co-workers...I can read the letters and write the checks and bills, and I can speak by telephone...I'm very grateful for SoBRO school."

CRES MONTIEL, ESL AND CIVICS STUDENT

"My English class is very good because my teacher Mr. Beda is the best."

KADIATOU SYLLA, ESL AND CIVICS STUDENT

"Before I don't understand any English. Now I can understand English. Before I don't read English. Now I can read English. Before I can't go to the store by myself. Now I can go to the store by myself. Before I don't listen to the news. Now I can understand the news...Before I don't understand my neighbor. Now I have a new friend."

LAUREE ANDERSON, GED STUDENT

"My experience these past twelve weeks has been a blessing for me...I am looking forward to getting my GED. I will not stop until I get it. I have a job waiting for me...the door has opened for me, so I cannot stop now. I am so glad that I came to SoBRO."

ROSARIO KATTIUSKEA, GED STUDENT

"Now I write better and that's thanks to my great teacher. I know I'm gonna go far. All I want in life I'm gonna get...I'm gonna have a better future for me and for my future children."