

Opening Doors of OPPORTUNITY

by Janie Franz



When Stephanie Boutte gets up every morning, she knows she is going to make a difference in someone's life. As the owner and director of the Houston Training and Education Center (H-TEC), she looks into each student's eyes when they visit her office, and can read more than what is in their transcripts. "I see the potential in each one. I help them get the qualifications that get them in the door. Each H-TEC graduate will make a decent living and have opportunities for growth. I also want each student to have the freedom of choice and a future full of hope, whether they ultimately go on to college, or use their skills to launch a career immediately" says Boutte.

College, once the proven path a better life isn't always a faster road to financial security, especially with rising tuition costs and tougher restrictions on student loans. In fact, there are two million people with 4-year college degrees who are not working in their fields and living in poverty. It should also be noted that a fourth of the unemployed workforce has a college degree.

Military is not the only option!

Students at Boutte's training center are typical of many high school students who are unsure of what to do with their lives after high school. The average student needs five years or more to finish an undergrad degree, rather than four; partly because of career choice changes, or a need to work while attending college. "The option for many undecided students, especially those not wanting or unable to incur a lot of debt, has been to turn to the military to learn a trade," states Boutte. "I want to offer another option for the families and children that may be fearful of this choice. The military may just not be a good fit for them."

Achieving independence in 11 months or less!

Though Boutte herself went to college, she started out initially with a tech school diploma and sees its value. Her daughter who graduated high school last year wanted to go to college, but Boutte encouraged her to take her program first. Her students start out earning \$10 to \$11 an hour. "In reality, even some college graduates have a hard time starting out at that level" she says. "Our program offers a great option for students to work in a career while exploring other ideas for the future. Students can work and save for college and/or additional training, while others may work part time and attend college immediately."

Boutte attests that the skills she learned in a career school have served her well. "My business today was built from the technical skills that I learned," she says. "I'm still not yet applying everything from college. I am, however, using all my technical school training." Boutte's own rise professionally mirrors those of some of her students. Growing up in poverty with little hope for the future, Boutte found herself pregnant while still a teenager. "There I was, a young girl about to bring a baby into the world and didn't know what to do. My cousin sent me to Houston to go to vocational training school." Taking a six month program, Boutte graduated just before her baby was born. Her computer courses put her at an advantage in the workplace because technology was just beginning to come to the South. She landed a position at the court house in her home town and rose to become a Deputy Assessor. "I wasn't even 20 years old at the time, but my vocational training skills got me in the door," Boutte says.



Boutte's unique concept offers hands-on learning with individual attention and state-of-the-art equipment.

"At that point, I chose to go on to college because by then, I had figured out it was something I definitely wanted to do."

Upon graduation from college, she earned a teaching certificate, and was hired by the vocational training school that she herself had originally attended. Her next career move was to teach High School in hopes of reaching the young girls like her self. "I wanted to catch them early before they got pregnant" she says. It was here that she solidified her dream of opening a school to help young men and women who were not going to college because of bad choices, lack of financial resources, or who had become uninspired by the academic realm.

She also recognized the need for many to retrain. Large corporations once thought of as institutions offering 'career jobs for life' have proven to become more unstable choices in recent years. Downsizing and layoffs threaten every occupation and position, including middle management. In addition, specialization in one field may dictate the need for retraining at some point in the future.

Giving a dream life!

Boutte's dream became the Houston Technology and Education Center. At any given time, her 100 plus enrolled students are a mix of, young people who didn't finish high school, to women looking to enter the workforce after a divorce, to people looking for a career change. Taking between seven & eleven months to complete, the programs currently offered by H-TEC include; Medical Assistant, Dental Assistant, Computerized Accounting Specialist, Computerized Office Administration, and Computer Applications Specialist. A special English as a Second Language course helps foreign or bilingual students succeed in the business world.

Boutte's unique concept offers hands-on learning with individual attention and state-of-the-art equipment. All students receive an individual education plan, assistance in writing a career plan, and placement services. Two months before graduation, each student does an externship in a work setting, putting what they've learned into use. Once students get in the door and start to move up, they can even come back for refresher courses free of charge.

When students graduate, they are easy to place. "When they go to work, they are ready to work. Employers are more interested in our graduates than kids coming out of college because our students have already applied everything that they've learned," she says. "We are building relationships with some prestigious companies, and we can place students there." We even have alumni come back to us, who are moving up in their careers, looking for students from the school to hire.

Education is just the beginning!

Boutte, however, believes that education is just the beginning. "Our students are people. Their problems are our problems. Their success is our success," she says. She will even show up on a student's doorstep if too many days of school are missed. That's why people in the community say that they want to go to Stephanie Boutte's school, not to H-TEC.

H-TEC is a Title-4 nationally accredited school and receives no state funds. It relies on tuition payments only. Students rely on Pell grants and student loans at manageable levels. The Houston Technology and Education Center measures success by providing training for jobs that are in high demand. Stephanie Boutte enables her students to launch successful careers. Job satisfaction for graduates also means that Boutte's vision for H-TEC is being achieved. The Center continues to plan for expansion as demand for programs increases and more employers seek H-TEC graduates.

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