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# For teenagers, a first job can do more than fund summertime fun



Photo by Walter Brewer

ENLARGE PHOTO

Vanessa Alonzo's first job has her learning leadership skills with Urban Roots.

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By **Valerie Menard**  
MARKETING PUBLICATIONS WRITER

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Like a first love, a first job is hard to forget. From fast food restaurants to seasonal work, entry-level jobs introduce teens to the working world, an important first experience for what they and their parents hope will be a long career path.

"It's just as important for teens to determine what they don't like when they enter the workforce as it is to find work they enjoy doing," said Austinite Claire Miner, a licensed professional career counselor and owner of Assessment and Counseling Services (online at [mycareeraustin.com](http://mycareeraustin.com)).

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of 16- to 19-year-olds working or actively looking for work grows sharply between April and July each year. In May 2010, 4,438,000 in this age group were employed, making up 3.2 percent of the U.S. workforce.

Eddie Allen, a 16-year-old student at Westlake High School, said he would like to find his first job this summer. He's applied at more than 10 businesses so far, mostly in the service industry.

"I'd like to be a little more financially independent," he said.

Luckily for Eddie and other teens, there are resources to help them find work. One of several job-listing sites dedicated to teens, [myfirstpaycheck.com](http://myfirstpaycheck.com), lists several employers who are hiring around Austin and also gives job application advice, a topic the website says "isn't something we always learn in school."

Jimmy John's Gourmet Sandwiches is among the employers listed on the website, and Charles Cox, a manager at one of the Austin sandwich shops, said he looks for employees with ambition who are willing to go the extra mile to get the job done.

"If I see that an applicant is enthusiastic and willing to work hard, that impresses me," said Cox, whose first job at age 16 was with a home construction company in his Kansas hometown. Many teenage job applicants don't have much work experience, so he looks for the right attitude.

Miner said that although teens lack a work history, they can show their aptitude by filling out an application legibly and clearly, acquiring letters of recommendation from teachers or family friends and demonstrating good communication skills in an interview.

First jobs may seem disposable, but they can teach critical lessons, like the value of punctuality and how to take criticism. As a recreation specialist at the Gus Garcia Recreation Center, Barbara Garcia knows the value of early employment. She helps train teens for summer jobs as part of the center's Work-Based Learning Program/Summer Youth Employment, a joint venture of the City of Austin and Travis County Health and Human Services Department.

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Garcia is also a graduate of the program.

Students in the program learn the type of behavior that can lead to a promotion — or termination — as well as what to wear to an interview (no T-shirts or spaghetti straps). They also develop a sense of pride from earning a wage, Garcia said.

"I remember running into students at the mall who had just completed the training and were spending money from their first paychecks," she said. "They were so proud, they showed me their purchases — which seemed less frivolous than what teens who spent money that was given to them were buying."

Urban Roots, a program of youthlaunch.org, also recruits students for summer work in Austin. The students receive an educational stipend of \$40 per day for working 35 hours per week. They work for about three hours each workday on a sustainable farm and also participate in work training and group activities that develop leadership and job skills.

"I never knew the work would be so hard," said Urban Roots participant Vanessa Alonzo, 15.

Vanessa, a student at William B. Travis High School, applied for the job during the recruiting period in the fall because she loves to be outdoors. Each week, students take turns training new volunteers. It's work that will benefit her later: her most valuable lesson so far, she said, has been learning leadership skills and how to speak to a crowd.

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