

Business

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ARMED WITH AN ASSOCIATE'S DEGREE, MADELINE SANTIAGO-NOVA WENT FROM BEING HOMELESS TO EARNING \$20 AN HOUR.

KAYANA SZYMCZAK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



NATHANIEL AWAN GOT OUT OF PRISON AND ENROLLED IN A PRE-APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM FOR UNION CONSTRUCTION WORKERS.

KAYANA SZYMCZAK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



VILMARYS CINTRON LEARNED HOW TO MANAGE HER FINANCES AND MOVED FROM PUBLIC HOUSING INTO HER OWN HOME.

SEAN PROCTOR/GLOBE STAFF



FORMER WAITRESS AMY P. TOOK AN ADMINISTRATIVE SKILLS COURSE AND IS NOW A CASE MANAGER.

DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

UP *and out*

Escaping poverty was a daunting prospect, but for 4 facing adversity, acquiring skills helped make it work

BY KATIE JOHNSTON | GLOBE STAFF

POVERTY COMES in many forms: a middle-aged man making \$10 an hour, a single mother with mouths to feed, a person with a criminal record and few employers willing to look past it. But the path out is often the same: acquiring a new skill, whether it's taking college classes or learning how to boost a lousy credit score.

Within the next few years, nearly two-thirds of all job openings in the United States will require at least some sort of certification, according to Georgetown University research. But funding for career training has declined drastically. In Massachusetts, the state budget for programs that provide these services has been slashed in half in the past decade.

Soon, however, lower-income residents may have more tools to lift themselves up. President Obama just launched an initiative to help workers upgrade skills, and last month, the White House held a summit with employers, nonprofits, tech innovators, and unions committed to expanding

and improving educational opportunities for millions of workers.

"It's very, very, very difficult to move up without accumulating higher-level skills," said Jerry Rubin, chief executive of Jewish Vocational Service, a Boston nonprofit that provides worker training. "Without them, people will be employed, but they will be at or below the poverty line."

Many who have lifted themselves out of desperate situations say they could not have gotten there on their own — or without a lot of effort. Here are a few of their stories.

NATHANIEL AWAN spent last fall learning how to build a tool box and a spice rack, among other construction skills, just a few miles from where he grew up in the Four Corners neighborhood of Dorchester. But he was a world away from his past.

Awan was the fifth child of a crack addict mother and the fifth of

Acquiring job skills was key in fighting poverty

► POVERTY
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her children to be taken away by the state. At 18, he tried to shoot a rival gang member; he was locked up for three years.

When he got out, he was determined to turn his life around. He started cooking and washing dishes at Haley House Bakery Cafe in Dorchester, which offers jobs to recently incarcerated workers. One of his regular customers was Daniel Mulhern, a prosecutor Awan knew from his days on the street who now oversees Operation Exit, a city program that helps people with criminal records get construction apprenticeships.

Awan, 26, enrolled in the program last fall and learned the basics of carpentry, sheet metal work, and other building trades. He is about to begin a five-year apprenticeship with Local 537, the pipefitters union, making \$26 an hour to start, with health care and retirement benefits. His job as a chef pays about half that.

Once certified to work on heating and cooling systems, Awan could make upwards of \$80,000 a year. The job could help him and his 4-year-old son, Naki, break the cycle of poverty, said Awan, smoking a cigar at his mother's kitchen table while she dozed in front of the TV.

"When Naki's 18 and I'm a foreman, I can bring my son in, and then he can bring his son in," said Awan, who has his son's and mother's names tattooed on either side of his neck. "I have no margin for error, because it's bigger than me now."

Vilmarsy Cintron spent most of her life in a Lynn public housing development — battling mice inside, drugs and fighting outside.

She first lived there as a teenager, shortly after her family arrived from Puerto Rico, and moved back into the same complex as a single mother. She had a job, as a social worker at a local Head Start program, and a dream of owning a home.

But making less than \$30,000 a year, she fell behind on her bills and went into debt. Buying a house seemed like something only other people could do.

Then she started a financial coaching program through the Boston nonprofit Compass Working Capital. Working with a financial adviser, Cintron started paying her outstanding debts. She took out a \$1,000 loan and paid it off to build her credit; she started fixing her own hair and saving her tax return refunds, socking away money every week.

Within three years, she had saved more than \$8,000, and earned \$5,300 in matching funds from Compass. She used it for the down payment and closing costs on a \$177,000 Colonial on a quiet street in Lynn.

She moved in with her teenage daughters, 1-year-old son, and fiancé a year and a half ago



SEAN PROCTOR/GLOBE STAFF

— the first time anyone in her immediate family has owned a home — and started making improvements: refinishing the wood floors, remodeling the bathroom, hanging up sparkly curtains. But her favorite part is the quiet.

"Nobody bothers us. Nobody's screaming out there," said Cintron, 36, noting that whenever her daughters pass their old place, they tell her how happy they are to no longer live there.

Earlier this spring, Cintron fulfilled another dream: opening an in-home day care in her new house. She is also working toward an associate's degree in early-childhood education.

It all started with learning how to manage her finances, Cintron said, which "opened for me a window that was closed for such a long time."

The moment Amy P. started taking a 12-week administrative skills course, she realized she had a lot to learn.

"The computer teacher said, 'Turn the computers on,' and I said 'I don't know how to turn a computer on,'" said Amy, who took the class at Project Hope, a Roxbury nonprofit that assists low-income women. (Project Hope does not permit its clients' last names to be publicized, because many have been abused.)

Amy, now 41, worked for years as a waitress at Faneuil Hall. She grew up poor in a South Boston housing development, with no money for college. Waiting tables and tending bar provided a steady living for a while. But then she got pregnant, her longtime boyfriend took off, and her parents died — all within a year.

Amy was already having a hard time paying bills when a faulty water main destroyed her restaurant, putting her out of work for months. In 2010, she turned to Project Hope for help with her rent, and ended up with a new career.

After taking the administrative course, she landed a part-time position at the nonprofit. Within six months, she worked her way up to a full-time administrative case manager, helping other women trying to lift themselves out of poverty.

But it turned out Amy was not so far removed from her cli-

ents. After her son's father stopped paying child support two years ago, Amy was evicted and spent months staying with family members. Then she found a second job, as house manager of a Roxbury apartment building, where she now lives.

The apartment is small. Amy sleeps on a pullout couch so her 7-year-old son can have the only bedroom. But she can afford to put him in youth hockey, and a break-dancing class. And once again she is able to tell him, "Let's go home," and truly mean it.

Education was not a priority for women in Madeline Santiago-Nova's family. Her parents, Puerto Rican natives who didn't speak English, trained her to be a good wife, she said. "As long as I could cook and clean and have babies, that was all that mattered," she said.

She dropped out of a New Jersey high school, and after a series of low-wage jobs, a lay-off, and a move to stay with family in Dorchester, she wound up homeless with two children in 2008.

Following an isolated year in a Saugus motel paid for by the state, Santiago-Nova found FamilyAid Boston, a homelessness agency that placed her in one of its shelter apartments in Mattapan and connected her with a free three-month computer class at Crittenton Women's Union, a nonprofit that supports low-income women.

Something clicked, and Santiago-Nova wanted to keep learning. She enrolled in a medical interpreting program at Bunker Hill Community College, while earning a certificate in substance abuse services and an associate's degree in human services.

Next was a job readiness course offering interview and resume skills through the nonprofit Career Collaborative. At the end of March, she started a full-time hospital job making more than \$20 an hour, helping connect patients with community resources.

"I am now middle class," said Santiago-Nova, 46, stretching her arms wide in the living room of the neat, subsidized Jamaica Plain apartment she shares with her 15-year-old

Vilmarsy Cintron started a day care in her home in Lynn. She is also working toward an associate's degree in early-childhood education.

son and 23-year-old daughter. "I guess since I live in the projects, it still hasn't hit me."

Her next goal: saving enough money to buy a home. It took three years of full-time classes to get here, struggling over algebra homework until 2 a.m., interning at a domestic violence shelter, volunteering with the elderly — all the while cooking, cleaning, and getting her son off to school.

Now, she said, she is equipped to leave welfare, and the projects, behind for good.

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