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# Year Up Atlanta graduates its inaugural class

Atlanta Business Chronicle - by [Maria Saporta](#) Contributing Writer

For longtime Atlanta businessman **Cecil Conlee**, the story of **Shannon Wroten** says it all. “She was without a house, and saw a sign for Year Up Atlanta,” Conlee said. “She was recruited into the program. And on Monday (Feb. 1), she started a full-time job with the Atlanta Fed. Year Up is about taking someone who is lost and is now on a career path.”

Wroten, along with 15 other students, was in the inaugural graduating class for Year Up Atlanta — a program that began in Boston in 2001 and now is reaching 1,000 students in six cities.

“The mission is to provide low-income young adults with the experience, skills and support that they need to make positive transitions into livable careers and post-secondary education,” said **Gerald Chertavian**, founder and CEO of Year Up, who was in town Jan. 29 for Atlanta’s inaugural graduation.

Chertavian said the inspiration for Year Up came from his experience as a Big Brother (now for 26 years) and witnessing firsthand the waste of human capital in a country as rich as the United States.

While attending Harvard’s Business School, Chertavian designed a business case for what is now Year Up.

The idea is relatively simple. Year Up spends six months training young adults on marketable skills, primarily information technology, and then they work as interns at companies or organizations for six months for about \$800 a week.

The first Atlanta class had nine internship partners — Printpack, **Kaiser Permanente** of Georgia Inc., **Genuine Parts Co.**, **Southern Co.**, Concessions International, the **Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta**, McKesson, Aaron’s, and **SunTrust Banks Inc.**

For example, Genuine Parts had two interns in the first class, and now they’ve signed on for three interns in the second group. Six other companies also have signed up for the second class: **Equifax Inc.**, **Bank of America**, **Turner Broadcasting Systems Inc.**, **Emory University Medical Center**, New York Life and GE/CompuCom.

“Our plan is that by 2012, we will be serving 160 students twice a year for a total of about 320 students,” said **Kweku Forstall**, executive director for Year Up Atlanta.

Year Up Atlanta currently has a \$4.5 million capital campaign to support the organization through 2011. It has raised \$2.1 million, including a \$750,000 grant from the **Robert W. Woodruff Foundation**.

Year Up Atlanta already has made inroads among some of the city’s top business leaders, including Conlee, founding partner of **CGR Advisors**; **Doug Ellis**, committee chairman of the **David, Helen & Marian Woodward Foundation**; consultant **John McDonald**; and **Ann Cramer**, **IBM**’s director of corporate community relations and public affairs for North America.

“Our goal for the program nationally is to serve 10,000 young adults a year,” Chertavian said. “We now are at 3,000, and our goal is to be at 10,000 by 2016.”

Chertavian shows no signs of stopping. He said half of all “disconnected” young people in America live in 30 cities with Atlanta in the top five with 23,000 disconnected youth in the metro area.

“We want young adults in those 30 cities to have access to a Year Up program,” Chertavian said. “Our goal is to make sure our young adults are seen as assets.”