

Realizing your potential

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By TERESA M. McALEAVY
STAFF WRITER

After "too long" a stay on the unemployment line, Jacqueline Dallas says, she finally found the guidance she needed to land a job after hooking up with Aviva Giannotti.

"The lady is just superb at helping you see your potential," says Dallas, a 44-year-old Maywood resident who has been doing accounts payable work for five months. "I still touch base with her often to make sure I'm staying on the right track professionally."

Giannotti works with people, young and more seasoned, on figuring out their interests and ways to pursue those interests professionally. Her Westwood-based College Bound and Beyond consulting business primarily offers high school students guidance on everything from getting into the college of their choice to writing résumés and building the self-esteem necessary to achieve their goals.

"I truly live by my motto, which is: 'If you don't know where you're going, you'll probably wind up someplace else,'" says Giannotti of River Vale.

She incorporated the business in 2003 after realizing the market's potential while working in various school settings. Last year, Giannotti was one of 10 women in the state to receive a \$5,000 grant from the New Jersey Association of Women Business Owners to expand their companies.

"It helps to have the seed money and the recognition," she says.

The idea to launch the business began to gel "years ago," while Giannotti worked as a college placement and financial aid counselor at Brooklyn College. She recalls noticing that most students just weren't thinking much about their future.

"I remember saying, 'These kids don't know what the hell they want to do,'" she says. "There was no direction, no guidance, no anything to help them specifically explore this before they got to college."

That, she says, was "way back" when high school-based counselors weren't focused on steering students to appropriate post-secondary schools or jobs. After going on to various other career and family life counseling-type positions, Giannotti decided the best way to serve young people in need was to branch out on her own.

She earned her master's in school counseling in May 2003, just before giving life to College Bound and Beyond.

"I work with anyone, but my biggest passion is working with students who are

learning disabled, who have things like dyslexia or ADHD [attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder]," she says.

"I feel so strongly that when you have these people neuropsychologically tested, they will come out with a higher IQ than most."

With an initial investment of about \$30,000 to cover the costs of basic supplies and office space, Giannotti began offering clients services in one-on-one and in some instances, family-based, sessions that range in cost from \$90 to \$100 per hour.

"I do some group workshops and group work for parents whose kids are going off to college for the first time," she says.

"It's so important for them to be involved because they're making an investment of up to \$150,000 on college and often don't plan for what they expect their child to get out of the experience."

Giannotti's "soup to nuts" rate for seeing a student through the entire college acceptance process costs about \$2,500. And she tracks their progress regularly afterward.

"Initially, I administer a personality assessment to measure things like values, interests, abilities, likes and dislikes," she says. "After the assessment is done, I will know the interest of that child, and go over the results with the family and student to start talking about career goals."

While Giannotti says most students won't necessarily choose a career at that point, it's important for them to start recognizing their strengths and desires.

The approach helped client David Waldman of Holmdel. The Georgetown University senior doubts he'd be set to graduate from the college of his choice without having sought out Giannotti's expertise.

"Initially, I went to George Washington [University] because my grades were good, but they weren't Georgetown good," says Waldman, who at 21 also works for Fuze Beverage in Englewood Cliffs. "But Miss Giannotti taught me how to do it and by sophomore year I got in to Georgetown."

Waldman says he learned how to write a polished résumé, connect with the right professors to get solid recommendations, and actually hand-delivered his application to Georgetown. The business management major, who hopes to become an entertainment agent or manager, says he's grateful for her input.

"Looking back, if I didn't have Miss Giannotti, I possibly wouldn't have gotten in," he says. "If you don't have someone like her on your team, you're at a severe disadvantage."

E-mail: mcaleavy@northjersey.com

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