

# CVS creates career pathways for Greater Lowell Tech students

Initiative started by Greater Lowell alumnus

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TYNGSBORO — Just as Lowell was the home to the first CVS store on Merrimack Street in 1963, Greater Lowell Technical High School can claim bragging rights as the home of the company's first Workforce Innovation and Talent Center.

Creating a pathway for students in the health care field was a passion project for Greater Lowell Tech alumnus Jon DaSilva, who grew up in Lowell's Pawtucketville neighborhood. After graduating in 2002, DaSilva would manage CVS stores in Tewksbury, Chelmsford and downtown Lowell. But the work started once he became a member of the Workforce Initiative.

"When I took this role about eight years ago, I was very passionate on creating pathways for youths," DaSilva said. "When I was able to join the workforce team, I was like, 'You know what? We have this great talent pool across Massachusetts with students and vocational technical high schools that other states traditionally may not have like we do here in Massachusetts.'"



This year, the initiative has brought on 200 students across the state and 51 students at Greater Lowell Tech.



The initiative operates on the model of a traditional co-op, with students spending one week in class and then spending another week working in the field. Students who choose to work with CVS don't have to travel far, because a CVS store was built on the school's campus.

DaSilva said the store was donated by CVS because students didn't have access to an "authentic learning lab." The space includes beds and dummies to help students practice checking vital signs.

"The students stock it, they order their own inventory, and then at the end of it, everything they sell (generates funds for a) scholarship. So we give it to the school as a donation at no cost to them. ... Whatever they sell out of there ends up being a scholarship for a graduating senior who's working at CVS," DaSilva said.

An internal team at CVS will read student applications and the award is presented during senior awards night. On average, the total is about \$5,000. This year, DaSilva said 50 students are eligible for the scholarship.

The program has made a difference for students who have participated in it, like McKenzie Schiavone, who got involved at a pivotal moment in her life.

Schiavone didn't necessarily want to pursue a career in pharmacy, but there weren't many medical assisting co-ops available in her junior year. It was also a chance to work hands-on in the health care field.



While she was still interviewing in July 2016, Schiavone and her mother became homeless. She was a top 10 student, with her entire senior year left, confronted with not knowing where they would stay.



She hid where she and her mother were staying, out of fear she would be forced to change schools. There were friends she didn't want to leave behind and she was about to start working for CVS.

"I just didn't want to give all that up because of the living situation I was in," Schiavone said. "I had my own car and I said, 'I'm gonna fake it 'til I

make it,' and I did. I got through and I'm very grateful for the partnership with the vocational school because I wouldn't be where I am today without it."

After graduating from Greater Lowell Tech, Schiavone went on to study at Simmons College in Boston. Because of CVS's large footprint, she was able to continue working for the company while she went to school.

She currently works as a district performance coordinator with CVS and credits her time with the company as giving her the stability she needed to be successful.

"I just want people to realize that they're not at a dead end no matter what they're going through, that there's always going to be other options, and I'm super grateful for CVS for the lasting connections that I've been able to make in my almost six years of employment with them, as well as the ever-continuing opportunities that are always just coming up," Schiavone said.

While Greater Lowell Tech is the place the initiative started, DaSilva said there are 20 different vocational schools across the state that are involved, including Shawsheen Valley Technical High School in Billerica.

