

LOWELL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

# Successful alumni return to Career Academy

LOWELL >> “Anyone can come here and talk to them, but when it is someone who has been in their shoes it just hits harder,” said Anthony Mitchell, 25, a successful entrepreneur and 2016 graduate of Lowell Public Schools’ Career Academy.

Mitchell and 2017 Career Academy graduate Wilmer Santos, 24, a journeyman electrician, recently returned to their alma mater to speak with a group of students as part of the school’s Career Speaker Series.

“I want to show that even though I went to school here just like them, I still made it through and am successful today,” said Santos. “Nothing can stop you besides yourself.”

The Career Academy, located on Smith Street in the city’s Highlands neighborhood, is an 88-student high school program aimed at re-engaging students who have gotten off-track in their education journey due to a number of factors and require additional supports, a smaller learning environment, flexible scheduling and competency-based teaching and learning. Career Academy graduates receive a Lowell High School diploma.

Santos said he always had a hard time engaging in school and “just didn’t want to do anything.” He came to the Career Academy as a freshman and admittedly did not put in too much effort his first two years. However, as junior year hit, he began to mature.

“I got to know the teachers here and realized they are really good people,” he said. “I started building relationships and thinking about the future.”

The Career Academy helped him get involved with Community Teamwork’s YouthBuild program, where he learned carpentry skills, became OSHA-certified to work with power tools and learned how to work productively as part of a team.

With YouthBuild, Santos and Mitchell both helped to build two new rooms on the stage in the basement of the school.

Santos recalled helping to build a deck and stairs on a house under construction in the city's Pawtucketville neighborhood and the feeling of accomplishment he felt as the project took shape.

"I found that to be really cool," he said. "I knew I didn't want to continue with carpentry, but it definitely made me want to jump into one of the trades."

Santos' uncle is an electrician and he started working with him after high school, as well as attending night classes two nights a week at Greater Lowell Technical High School, where he earned his electrician's license. Today, he works all across the state on a variety of projects from home renovations in the suburbs, to newly constructed giant office and apartment buildings in Boston. He likes being able to work in different communities and explore the different restaurants and cultural offerings in those areas. Every job is a new adventure.

"I get up early and I work hard," Santos said. "If your mindset is straightforward and you are dedicated, nothing can stop you."

Mitchell said as a young teenager he dealt with a lot of anger issues and had no interest in school.

"I didn't know what I wanted to do," he said. "I started partying and hanging out with the wrong crowd. I always had my head down, sleeping in class."

After being unsuccessful at Chelmsford High School and Lowell High School, he enrolled in the Career Academy, a school he credits with much of his success today because "they always tried their best to give us all of the opportunities."

As a senior in high school, he used his videography skills to start his first small business — shooting music videos, football games and other events for clients.

"If you become valuable and offer value the money will follow," he said.

After high school, he sold cars, a job he said taught him how to sell, build relationships and talk to people. He found himself jumping from one job to another, never really finding that perfect fit. That was when he decided he needed to change his approach.

“I knew in my heart I was so much bigger than what I was doing,” Mitchell said. “I invested in myself; I went all-in on myself.”

Mitchell said he began networking, meeting as many people as he could and learning about what they do. He also learned about how money and investing works and how to best grow the revenue one is earning.

Today, he runs five online businesses and travels speaking to groups of people about how to make and grow their money.

“Too many people chase money,” he said. “You need to chase knowledge and problems; once you find the solutions to the problems the money will follow.”

Mitchell owns several properties in Texas, Florida and Tennessee he rents out through Airbnb, runs an online shopping club with 300 monthly clients, is a wholesale real estate seller and is involved in NFTs and cryptocurrency. He has a diverse business portfolio, works for himself and doesn't have to punch a time clock.

He told the students that even though they may not like doing school work, the basics of math and English are important to future success.

“Just bust this out,” he said. “Learning this stuff will help you in the real world.”

He also advised them to be nice to everyone because “you never know who or what you might need in five years.”

The students in the class were asked to share what they are interested in doing in the future. They have big goals including: dental school, studying machine tech at GLTHS, cosmetology school, law school, information technology and coding, and investing in real estate and gambling.