

# Citizen Journalism

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“Job Corps changed my life. It made me a better man. I used to sleep in all day, and now I wake up early. I’m the first one up on my dorm floor, and tell everyone to get up and let’s get it.”

— Brandon Diggs, 22, student at the Job Corps Center in Crystal Springs, Miss.

## Hard-won successes for orators

### Job Corps trains youths to compete, improve lives

By BEKAH GRIM  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

After winning the National Job Corps Student Oratory Competition, 22-year-old Brandon Diggs had to turn away from the audience, overwhelmed by the standing ovation and lightning storm of camera flashes.

“I can’t believe this. Job Corps is the best thing that has ever happened to me,” Mr. Diggs kept saying as he hugged his mother amid the flurry of excitement.

The speech competition drew more than 200 political leaders and spectators to the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center on Wednesday. It was the highlight of a three-day celebration of Job Corps’ 45th anniversary. Throughout its history, the Jobs Corps has served more than 2.5 million high school dropouts by providing housing, job training and opportunity.

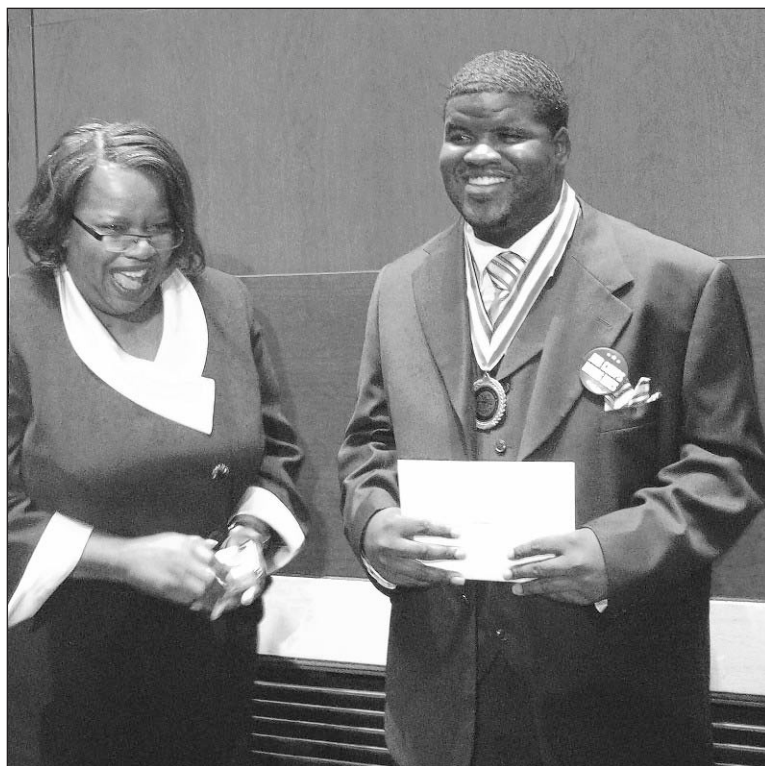
Mr. Diggs is a changed man after joining the Crystal Springs, Miss., Job Corps Center in 2008. He described his youth as “gangs, thugs, smoking weed and getting drunk.” At 14, he watched his elder brother get killed on the street. At 17, Mr. Diggs dropped out of high school. “I knew I was headed down the same road as my brother, but I thought there could be something different for me,” he told The Washington Times.

He saw a Job Corps commercial on TV and decided it was time to make a change.

“Job Corps changed my life. It made me a better man,” said Mr. Diggs. “I used to sleep in all day, and now I wake up early. I’m the first one up on my dorm floor, and tell everyone to get up and let’s get it.”

Mr. Diggs now calls the staff and students at Crystal Springs “family” and is studying to become a plumber.

Job Corps students nationwide were asked to write speeches on the topic “What Job Corps Means to



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BEKAH GRIM/THE WASHINGTON TIMES  
Celebrity chef and competition judge Robert Irvine of the Food Network’s “Dinner: Impossible” honors Job Corps culinary arts students. Brandon Diggs, 22, is the National Job Corps Oratory Competition winner, a proud fact for him and his mother (left).

Me.”

The judges of the competition included Rep. Earl Pomeroy, North Dakota Democrat, and celebrity chef Robert Irvine of the Food Network’s “Dinner: Impossible.”

One of the four finalists, Melissa Franc, 21, held the podium with both hands and looked straight at the audience: “Job Corps means that I no longer feel invisible. I am a somebody.”

Job Corps is the nation’s largest and most successful work-force development program for high school dropouts, with 123 centers in the District, 50 states and Puerto Rico. Administered by the U.S. Department of the Interior, it serves 16- to 24-year-olds. Students live in dorms on Job Corps campuses while participating in academic and vocational training. There is a zero-tolerance policy on alcohol, drugs and violence.

Most Job Corps students enter the program with a reading level below the eighth-grade average. Yet under the structured environment and close support of staff, students improve their math and reading skills by at least two grade levels by the end of the program.

“Job Corps is a holistic experience for these students that they couldn’t get walking down the street to a GED program or in a large

public school,” National Job Corps Association President LaVera L. Leonard told The Washington Times. “We’re different because we get kids out of destructive environments and into a supportive place with small class sizes, social-skills training and industry involvement. This is changing kids like Brandon Diggs’ lives.”

Alonzo Serna, 19, from the San Jose Job Corps Center, said he didn’t think he had a career future when he struggled to find a job and that Job Corps gave him a second chance.

“Job Corps is different than school because you get to choose to be here and work hard. I can now say I am proud that I took this opportunity,” he said.

Mr. Serna graduated from the San Jose center in June, after completing the culinary arts and transportation programs.

He now aspires to be a chef on a train. “I even got my CPR license, so if someone chokes in my restaurant I can help them,” said Mr. Serna, whose favorite dish to prepare is chicken alfredo.

The anniversary event also allowed one-day internships in political offices on Capitol Hill. Students were able to interact with policymakers and government personnel throughout the weekend.

Job Corps is “something our government leaders got right,” said Ms. Leonard. “It’s not every day a government program celebrates its 45th year.”

“We are a tested, accountable program that partners with private-sector companies to move students into the work force,” she said.

Job Corps provides a career transition service and job placement in local companies to help students succeed after graduation.

Maureen Lambe, executive vice president of the National Apartment Association Education Institute, hires District-area Job Corps students to work as maintenance technicians.

“This is a great partnership for businesses,” she said. “These students consistently excel in the apartment industry because they come into the job with solid plumbing, air conditioning and electrical skills because of Job Corps.”

Part of Job Corps’ success has been the program’s ability to adapt to a changing technological world. This year showcased the results of a robotics program that participates in the worldwide US First Robotics Competition. Students built “Evo” the robot from scratch in six weeks. The 4-foot-tall robot is operated by a joystick and can shoot balls at targets.

Laurie Pianka, director of education services at Job Corps’ charter school, the School for Integrated Academics and Technologies, manages Team 1834 at the San Jose Job Corps Center in California. “Most of these kids don’t think of themselves as future possible engineers or scientists, and we want to show them these careers are within their reach,” she said.

Every student who has participated in the robotics program has gone on to complete their high school diploma, and many are now in college studying technology, engineering and science.

Job Corps is also joining the green movement as it updates curriculum to teach composting, solar-panel installation and energy conservation.

“We are training our students to be competitive in a market of emerging green and technological jobs and opening the career world to them,” Ms. Pianka said. “Job Corps wants to show kids they are not at risk, but at promise.”

Mr. Diggs has promised to take his mother out to dinner with his \$1,000 prize from the speech competition.

“This is the best thing that has ever happened to me,” Mr. Diggs said as he kissed his first-place medal.

### 2 American masters topics for seminar

Two American masters — self-exiled intellectual and author James Baldwin and “Record Man” Ahmet Ertegun — will be the topics of discussion at Georgetown University on Oct. 5 when Magdalena J. Zaborowska of the University of Michigan and Georgetown history professor Maurice Jackson, a jazz specialist, lead a seminar titled “African American-Turkish Connections Through the Arts.”

The seminar — set for 6:30 to 9 p.m. at the Copley Formal Lounge and co-sponsored by the Turkish Coalition of America, the Institute of Turkish Studies, Howard University and Georgetown — will look at the lives of two arts masters who were born as their homelands emerged from World War I and reborn as post-World War II America grappled with the meaning of civil rights and civil liberties.

Mr. Baldwin, a native New Yorker who lived in Istanbul and elsewhere in Europe for decades, once proclaimed

that Turkey “saved my life” because of the freedoms he lived and breathed there but was denied as a black man in America. In the meantime, Mr. Ertegun, who grew up in Washington and whose ambassador father opened the family home to blacks who entered through the front door, was becoming a prolific arts entrepreneur whose love of music eventually led to the formation of Atlantic Records. The label’s hit artists included Ray Charles and the Clovers.

“TCA is proud to sponsor this program that highlights the shared history of Turkish Americans and the African-American community in D.C.,” TCA President Lincoln McCurdy told The Washington Times. “The legacy of Ahmet Ertegun of breaking down racial barriers through music should inspire all Americans. Additionally, James Baldwin’s works and his courageous stance on gender, race and sexual equality should remind us that local activism and the arts have always been close together in

African-American communities, that they have always had a transnational and global dimension.”

Said Ms. Zaborowska, author of “James Baldwin’s Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile,” “Baldwin’s claim, [that] Turkey ‘saved my life,’ referred to the freedom he felt in Istanbul from racial and sexual oppression, the freedom that transformed him and his writing as a black writer, novelist, playwright and civil rights movement activist.”



### Special education gaps in Alexandria

Alexandria’s special education students have lower pass rates than other students, according to state testing data released last month.

Sixty-seven percent of special-education students passed the English test and 58 percent passed the math portion, according to the Virginia Department of Education. In both instances, the numbers

are below the statewide average and the federal No Child Left Behind benchmark.

School officials have recognized the achievement gaps and are considering such remedial actions as hiring literacy coaches and developing individual action plans for students.

The news comes as a study, also released last month, shows that the number of public school youths diagnosed with the mildest form of learning disability, called specific learning disability, or SLD, has grown substantially.

Between 1977 and 2006, the proportion of public school students diagnosed with SLD grew from 1.8 percent to 5.6 percent, and by the end of that period nearly 41 percent of all special-education students had been labeled with SLD, according to researchers Jay P. Greene and Marcus Winters at the Manhattan Institute.

### D.C. voucher update

For the sixth straight year, the U.S. Department of Edu-

cation has chosen the Washington Scholarship Fund to administer the popular voucher program called the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. The agency recently denied scholarships for 216 eligible students. The scholarships, which are for children from low-income families, are for the 2009-10 school year.

More than 90 percent of the students who were denied vouchers have been assigned to a public school that is in need of improvement, corrective action or restructuring, a spokesman for the fund said.

Independent studies have shown that children in the program have improved test scores and that parents are more involved in their children’s education.

“The Opportunity Scholarship Program has demonstrated that it improves the education of the low-income students who participate. It is a blessing for the current families in the program that they can continue to be served by the Washington Scholarship Fund,” said Joseph E. Robert Jr., chair-

man of the Washington Scholarship Fund. “But it is hypocrisy and purely politics that the benefits of the program are being limited to current children and that WSF has to turn away families who are desperate for their children to benefit from a scholarship. Having said that, we are pleased that the Department of Education recognizes both the continuing value of Opportunity Scholarships to the children of the District, as well as WSF’s prudent stewardship of this program.”

### Write about what’s happening in your community.

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