

## Meaningful Work Supports Students to Achieve their Goals

*By Cynthia Peters, Editor, The Change Agent*

In her poetically titled [Change Agent](#) article, “Growing Roots through My Hands,” Elyse Hardy describes her participation in [The Tutorial Center’s Youth Agriculture Project](#) (YAP), which included remediating soil, hauling rocks, establishing a pump system, planting, and harvesting, and finally selling the crop at the local Farmer’s Market. When this group of Vermont students had questions about farming practices, they connected with a network of organic farmers. When they had more produce than they could sell, they found worthy community groups to donate it to. And they started a side business – processing leftover tomatoes into salsa and making zucchini oatmeal bars.

For Renette Gonzalez, YAP inspired her to continue her education and become more involved in the community. Her story exemplifies the kind of success YAP is accustomed to. The vast majority of its students (89%) achieve an educational goal within a year of participating in YAP, and most (57%) obtain a job in a similar time frame. Although Renette had hated school and had dropped out, she found direction and purpose at YAP, completing her high school diploma, enrolling in Bridge to College, and becoming a mentor to other YAP participants. She now attends the Community College of Vermont.

Elyse and Renette tell their stories in the September 2014 issue of *The Change Agent*, which is a magazine that uses relevant and engaging content to teach basic skills to adult learners. *The Change Agent* featured these two writers because they are real-world examples of how meaningful work and engagement with the community can provide the personal agency and sense of belonging to community that students often need to persist in school. (Look [here](#) for more information on key drivers of student persistence.)

As federal support for adult education is increasingly tied to workforce training, it is good to remember what we learn from Renette and Elyse and the Tutorial Center of Vermont. It matters that the work is meaningful – that we can bring our whole selves into it and see that what we are doing has an impact on our community. As adult educators prepare students for the workforce, we need to take into account not just the needs of the labor market, but the needs of the workers as well. And if the workplace is not meeting the workers’ needs, then workers need to see themselves as sufficiently empowered to notice problems, build connections with others, and advocate for changes.

There are so many stories of ordinary people figuring out not just how to find a job, any job, but how to find a good job...or how to make the job they have a better one. But these stories are not always easy to come by, which is why *The Change Agent* seeks them out and promotes them. When teachers bring these stories into the classroom, they can use them both to teach basic skills and as a model for students to see themselves as members of the workforce who have a say in what work looks like.

Over the years, *The Change Agent* has had many different themes – from food, fashion, and health to technology, immigration, and the economy. No matter what the focus, the magazine always highlights writings by adult learners – many of them reflecting on their career goals, their current jobs, and their struggles to improve the wages and dignity they receive on the job. The content inspires and connects with students because it speaks to their deepest desires – like those expressed by Elyse and Renette – to earn money in a meaningful way, to be problem-solvers, and to be agents of change in their own lives, their workplaces and their communities.

**References:**

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Cynthia Peters is the editor of *The Change Agent*, published by the New England Literacy Resource Center at World Education in Boston, Massachusetts. *The Change Agent* is available in print or online (where audio versions of articles are also available) for a small fee. Visit <http://changeagent.nelrc.org/> for more information.