

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You are listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim. Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Since 1984, the national nonprofit STRIVE has helped nearly 90,000 graduates gain access to the training and support needed to build a career. To talk about the 40 years of success and where we're going, I am joined by Phil Weinberg, the president and CEO of STRIVE. And Roy Castro, STRIVE's Board Co-Chair. Gentlemen, thank you for joining me.

Philip Weinberg, STRIVE President & CEO:

Great to be here. Thank you.

Roy Castro, STRIVE Board Co-Chair:

Thank you for having us.

Phil, let's start on the history. Tell me a little bit about how STRIVE started 40 years ago.

Philip Weinberg, STRIVE President & CEO:

Sure. Well, we're proud to be celebrating 40 years. So it was 1984, a group of volunteers gathered in the basement of the Johnson Houses public housing here in East Harlem, New York, looking to help individuals who'd been historically excluded from building careers and gaining opportunity, get access not just to getting a job, but to keeping a job and building a career. And so what started in the basement of Johnson has grown into a national organization.

We do this because we believe in the principles of equity and justice and opportunity for all. There's too many individuals, as we know in our communities who are talented and looking for access to build a career, often don't know where to go. We believe at STRIVE in giving them a fair shot. And as you noted over our 40 years, which we celebrate this year, we've served nearly 90,000 men and women with high quality evidence-based programming, and have ambitious visions for the future.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Roy, maybe you can jump in and tell us a little bit of how that is put into play. How does that support come about? And you speak from someone who has personal experience in this.

Roy Castro, STRIVE Board Co-Chair:

Yeah, I definitely have personal experience in this as literally 22 years ago? 21, 22 years ago, I actually graduated from STRIVE. I am a proud STRIVE alumni. I was one of the lucky ones that was able to go to STRIVE, and STRIVE took me in and guided me at when I was literally at my most darkest moment in my life when I was most lost, and I needed more than just a job at that time, and STRIVE was there to pick me up.

So from now me servicing as a co-chair and being able to promote STRIVE and out and wave the STRIVE flag and go into cities and go into people to explain to them what does it mean to help STRIVE, what does that look like? As a nonprofit, of course we're always looking for funding, but it's not just about funding. We're looking for people that really care about the work, people that really believe that we could do some real good things in their town and, in their city. We sit with them and go through the whole process of what does real support looks like.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Phil, what's the model? How are you supporting people and getting them on this pathway?

Philip Weinberg, STRIVE President & CEO:

First of all, to note, most students come to us unemployed and they oftentimes can get access to a job, but they're tired of that revolving door of low wage, low quality jobs. And so they come to STRIVE because we have a track record of helping people access careers that have good quality job conditions and the potential for upward mobility. So our whole orientation is around supporting individuals who are motivated, talented, often don't know where to go. We work with young adults and adults. Our average age is about 30. We work with both men and women. Most of our students come to us on public assistance looking to create a sense of financial independence and empowerment for themselves and their families. Over 40% of our students are parents to minors.

And so we've built a model that is comprehensive to support people who are often encountering significant hurdles in life through no fault of their own. Injustices, racial injustices, injustices in systems and criminal justice. I should note that over 40% of our students do have experience with the criminal justice system, have been impacted by the criminal justice system.

So our model is about a 10 week at no cost to our students training that has five components to it. And I won't belabor the components other than to note that in addition to partnering closely with employers and understanding what credentials are important for our students to access high quality, high growth occupations, we also focus extensively on the habits and behaviors and mindset to be successful at work.

So we have a very intensive workshop, three to four weeks that's focused on team building and managing conflict and professional communications and all of those, what people call soft skills. We know these are essential skills. And as our students are going through their training both around the habits and mindset of work and then the occupational skills, they're supported by coaching and mentorship.

And once they complete their 10 weeks of training, they then work with our employment team to access high quality job opportunities. And we've got high rates of success in helping our students get their foot in the door in accessing full-time jobs. And our work then is not done because a key ingredient for STRIVE is lifetime support. So we focus on the success of our graduates, the upward mobility of our graduates, and also they know that once they're out in the working world, whether they want to advance in a career or they've found themselves in a transition, lost a job at a difficult point, they can come back into our coaches to our team and have the support system at STRIVE to retool, re-energize and get themselves once again geared toward building a career.

The last thing I just want to note about the model is that we focus on occupations where the barrier to entry is not out of reach if you don't have a post-secondary degree. But the conditions are present for good jobs with mobility potential. That leads us to a handful of industries where we've really developed expertise around healthcare, mostly in non-clinical positions. There's a world of opportunity and positions within health systems that have quality jobs and opportunity for advancement, within construction and facilities related positions where you can get your foot in the door and then build a trade and build what can be a very high quality career, and also around logistics and supply chain.

And what we do is we work in concert with our local partners in the different cities where we're based to identify which of the occupations and industries are best suited for STRIVE to support the local employers and workforce ecosystem in supporting residents and accessing good careers.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Roy, you mentioned that you came into STRIVE as a client and it came at a time when it was a very difficult transition period for you. I believe that you had spent some time in the criminal justice system and what they gave you was able to help you become your own entrepreneur, and now you have a successful company. So talk about what you learned there and how that has helped you because this is what they want. This is what STRIVE is after, what you want.

Roy Castro, STRIVE Board Co-Chair:

Yeah, it is the secret sauce, right? It is like how to do it. And then now we're spending our time to going around and trying to create 10,000 of me a year out there, right? That's the goal. But this is why I'm so passionate and why 22 years later I'm equally, if not as more as passionate and I give my time to STRIVE, is because I want you to just think about that. They took a Roy at the time, was 28 years old, never had a job in his life, only knew the street life. After the street life. He only knew prison life. No job experience, no corporate America experience, never had a manager, didn't like command and chain of command, didn't understand that. And STRIVE was able to take this kid in four short weeks in the media to show this kid that there's more out there.

We know you have to put up this big front to survive where you come from, but clearly you're here because you want this change. Now let me show you this blueprint and now if you believe we're going to show you this blueprint and how you can make it happen. And then through that process, they kept their word when I did get a job and then I came back. And then even when I got my own business, I didn't understand business, I came back to STRIVE and requested a meeting and they said, "Oh, you need another job?" I said, "Wow, I'm in a different situation. I actually need a business lawyer." And it just so happens that we had a lawyer on the board, so they say, "Hey, let me introduce you to a board member who's an attorney." And even through that entrepreneurial startup, they assisted me through that process. So when they talk about full circle, it's a full service. And that's where the passion comes from.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It feels to me, and either one of you feel free to jump in or both of you. It feels to me that the importance is just as Roy just said, he did not have that experience in his life. He didn't know where to turn. He didn't know what to expect in first, just in the work world and then in the business world. And to have someone there that can be able to provide that insight and say, "Hey, this might be successful to you," seems to be one of the, somebody said it, secret sauce to what STRIVE might be doing.

Philip Weinberg, STRIVE President & CEO:

Go on Roy, why don't you feel this?

Roy Castro, STRIVE Board Co-Chair:

Yeah, it was astonishing to me. Again, this is what I love about, by the way, this is what I love about my position here as the co-chair, because when I do speak to people, I forget when I have to put on my alumni hat or when I have to put on my co-chair hat. It depends. So right now I just feel like the student, the client. Actually, I'm going to purely talk to you about my experience coming through the process because, can you imagine I sat there, they introduced me to Arthur and he explained to me this and what should I do. And he started guiding me and then started offering me mentorship and then started leading me towards mentorship.

And I say that to say this part, about two months ago I was at a STRIVE graduation and I met a client who was on the verge of quitting. He was quitting, he was gone. He wasn't going to come back. I took him to the back. I just so happens to be there. I went through a class. It was pure serendipity that this was going on. I didn't have to be there. I go to the back and he speak to me. He's like, "Yeah, I'm going to quit because I got this stuff going on." I said, "Let me ask you, what you want to do in life?" "Oh, I'm trying to do this and I want to write a book." Everybody want to write a book. And everybody got a Netflix special in them, and I believe they do, right? This is all good.

So I'm like, "Let me tell you a little story." So I told them this story about me and how I wanted to be an entrepreneur, and then what happened, and then how STRIVE assisted me. So I said, "See you looking at STRIVE as you just have to graduate this program for a job. No, STRIVE is here long term. STRIVE will help you put a movie out." So if you thinking about trying to get to Netflix, who else do you know is six degrees away from a Netflix owner? Because STRIVE's board is. Who else in your projects is that close? Who could even make that phone call? Who even cares? And he was like, "I never thought of it that way." And I said, "But they did it for me. I'm here." So that story speaks volumes to your question.

Philip Weinberg, STRIVE President & CEO:

The most common testimonial I hear from our students, in addition to sort of understanding from them the sense of confidence and self-worth they feel coming through a program like STRIVE is the sense of being at a place where people really care. And so having myself come out of government and work in large institutions, you know that when you try to do things at scale, it's hard to balance that quality and depth and personalization with doing things not at scale.

And at STRIVE, we are very focused on being human-centered and people-centered and relationship-based. And every student matters and they feel the worth. And we have high expectations for them and what they need to put into the program. But they know they walk into STRIVE, whether it's in New York or Birmingham or any of the cities where we operate and they find a support system.

And that mentorship, that coaching, that sense of I'm at a place that has my back. It's a positive place. It's not just our staff, it's their classmates who are rooting for one another. It's an incredibly powerful and empowering ingredient. And so we work really hard as an organization to preserve the integrity of that spirit and that culture everywhere STRIVE shows up and in every interaction that our students have with STRIVE, both while they're in the program and once they graduate as an alum.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You mentioned it started in East Harlem, you're in Birmingham, I believe you're in New Orleans too. Where are you around the country if people want to check out STRIVE and see what it might be able to do for them?

Philip Weinberg, STRIVE President & CEO:

We are in about a dozen cities and growing. And so we show up in communities both through partners. So organizations that license with STRIVE, partner with us to deliver our evidence-based workforce programming within their broader portfolio of services. That's in cities like Baltimore and San Diego and throughout Connecticut and other cities around the country, and also sites that we operate directly.

And so you noted Birmingham and Atlanta, and thank you for mentioning New Orleans. We're just back last week from our very first graduation, our first graduating class of STRIVE, New Orleans. And the sense of promise and potential and the sense of excitement and enthusiasm. And the one thing I would note is no matter where STRIVE shows up through our portfolio, our network of programming and

partners, it always happens in partnership with community. STRIVE always shows up in concert with community, with public officials and mayor's offices and anchor institutions like community colleges, other nonprofit providers, local philanthropy and other anchor institutions.

It's always about how do we do something bigger together? How do we access those residents that often can't get their foot in the door? And how do we bring what is a proven time-tested model to help individuals who are looking for something more, have been challenged with where to go to find that? And how do we do that in a way that enhances the community? We don't come in to replace or to replicate or to duplicate, but how do we find ways that we can contribute and enhance and build something stronger together? So we're contributing to a local workforce system and local ecosystem.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It sounds very much like the model is working with the community. Everybody's in this together, which sounds again, what is at the heart of STRIVE. Roy?

Roy Castro, STRIVE Board Co-Chair:

Yeah. So as Phil is talking, and again, I think a through line you're going to see with me is the word secret sauce. When you thinking top down, a government official, a politician will look at their city and be like, "We need this workforce development program and we need to do more for our constituents." Okay, got it. You look at STRIVE, you see how the success rate. As far as I'm concerned, that's the easy part.

The difficult part is the locals. How do you go in here? How do you talk to the locals and get the locals to say, "We need you here. You're not just coming in here with your white gloves and your white hat, your big New York City guys coming in here thinking you're just going to take over." I'm telling you this. This is what I heard in these places. So this is real conversations. I mean, real conversation where they had me and fill in a room, like the locals had me and fill in a room and we had to win them over. And they was like, "Okay. When we get their stamp of approval, that puts the wind beneath our feet."

And then we go back into these corporate office and then we go back into see the mayors of those towns. Then go see the politicians and say, no, "Now we deserve to be here. Now the people want us here. So now we have to be here." When I'm in these centers, that's what I look for. That's what I see. I want to go there. "Hey, Phil." I'm like, "Take me there. Let's go where the action is at." We could come out to eat out here tonight. This morning I need to be here.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

As we wrap up, Phil, where are we going now? What's the next step for STRIVE? What's the next 40 years?

Philip Weinberg, STRIVE President & CEO:

The next step for us is a leap, and we are proud of our heritage, our legacy, all that we've accomplished, the people who were instrumental in making STRIVE happen and possible, and all of those who support and sustain us. But we've got big audacious goals for the future. So right now we serve about 2000 men and women across the country, across our network of programming. And we want to grow that to 10,000 a year.

To do so, we've set ambitious targets for our ability to engage in new communities, to do so with quality and depth and authenticity. And as we do so to ensure that we're not just, again, helping individuals access jobs, but we're really focused on what is so often elusive in this arena. And I've been in this arena, this sort of workforce arena for a while. There's a lot of talk about economic mobility, upward mobility,

social mobility. But it takes deep investment to really help someone not just get that first step, which is critically important, but navigate that journey, those upward steps. So that you're going from \$40,000 a year to 60, to 80 to a hundred,.

And for everyone, it is a journey. It doesn't all happen in one step. So for us, it's about bringing the promise of upward mobility to life for everybody in a way that centers equity and access and justice. And to do that in more places in partnership with more communities where STRIVE can stay true to our legacy and our heritage of being deeply committed to human-centered people-centered community-centered services that benefit the whole community, the employers, the local residents, and the community at large.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Phil Weinberg, president and CEO of STRIVE. Roy Castro, STRIVE Board Co-Chair and Alumni. Thank you both for sitting down with me and talking.

Philip Weinberg, STRIVE President & CEO:

Thank you for having us.

Roy Castro, STRIVE Board Co-Chair:

Yes, this was great. Thank you for having us.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.