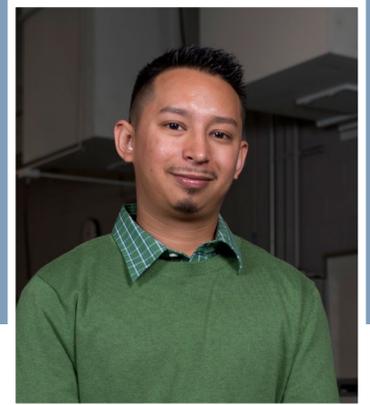




IMPACT PROFILE: JOEL PEREZ



MANUFACTURING PATHWAY LEADS TO BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR ACCELERATING OPPORTUNITY PARTICIPANT

In late 2011, Joel Perez was as a single father of two young girls, working 16 to 18 hours every day just to support his family. Joel worked multiple jobs as a landscaper and house cleaner in the daytime, while picking up shifts at a local restaurant in the evening. As he struggled to provide both the financial and emotional support that his children needed, he realized there must be a better path for him to develop professionally while setting an example for his daughters.

A few months earlier, Joel had completed his GED in hopes that it would open up more secure employment opportunities for him. A friend suggested that he look into further credentials via Elgin Community College's newly launched Computer Numerical Control (CNC) Operator program, which is a part of the college's Accelerating Opportunity initiative in Illinois. Joel had always had an

interest in engineering, an integral part of the program, so he seized the opportunity and in January 2012, enrolled in the 11-month program.

**“ I JUST KEPT MY EYES
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“It was hard...I was still working late shifts in the restaurant kitchen, and I was running on 3 or 4 hours of sleep a night because of trying to balance school work and my job,” says Joel. “But I just kept my eyes on the prize in front of me. The great thing about Accelerating Opportunity is that they don't let you fail. They give you all the tools you need to succeed, and as long as you apply yourself, many doors will open for you.”

Juggling work, school, and being a father to two girls, Joel received his accreditation in CNC in December 2012, and was introduced to an entirely new realm of career opportunities upon completion of the Accelerating Opportunity program.

During the second semester, in his last design class, Joel's teacher asked if he would consider continuing his education by pursuing an Associate's degree. Joel took his teacher's recommendation and began pursuing his Associate's degree while also participating in an apprenticeship program as a Machine Operator. The company he worked for ended up downsizing, but he was able to easily find an engineering role while working toward completing his Associate's degree in Manufacturing Technology. Joel graduated with his degree in December 2014.

Because of the strong regional network established through Accelerating Opportunity, Joel was able to use his faculty connections to secure a full time job with a local manufacturer upon graduation. The job provides him the salary he needs to support his two children, and the hours allow him to keep evenings and weekends available for time with his family.

Joel, like many past participants of Accelerating Opportunity, remains heavily involved in the program at his alma mater. He served as a mentor for incoming students for several months, and now speaks on behalf of the college at various manufacturing industry conferences and summits. He enjoys attending these networking events and his future goals lie in creating a new type of branded technology for one of his favorite forms of self-expression, tattoo artistry.

A little friendly competition is always present when he runs into his former CNC classmates at these occasions. The first group of CNC graduates formed a strong bond through the mentorship and tutoring programs offered by Accelerating Opportunity. They have now built their own professional network, and confer with each other on tricks of the trade, pursuing further certifications and industry news.

"I always stay connected to my classmates, as they constantly are growing in their careers and showing me different approaches to my work that I can take back to my job," says Joel. "That's the biggest thing that Accelerating Opportunity did for me—it made me confident in my work and it made me believe in myself. I was pushed out of my comfort zone during that first semester but I realized I could do whatever I set my mind to."

Accelerating Opportunity increases the number of adults with low basic skills who enter postsecondary education and quickly earn credentials that lead to high-demand, living-wage jobs. The national initiative integrates Adult Basic Education with career and technical education and comprehensive support services into clear pathways that promote student success and meet the needs of local employers.

Jobs for the Future works with our partners to design and drive the adoption of education and career pathways leading from college readiness to career advancement for those struggling to succeed in today's economy. Across the country, we work to improve the pathways leading from high school to college to family-supporting careers. Our work aligns education and training to ensure that employers have access to a skilled workforce.



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