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YOUTHBUILD JUST A START MARKS MAJOR MILESTONE WITH 2025 GRADUATION *25 Graduates Join Global Network of more than 210,000 YouthBuild alumni*

Cambridge, MA — September 12, 2025 — YouthBuild Just A Start proudly celebrated the achievements of 25 graduates at a ceremony held at the Cambridge Public Library. This year marks the largest graduating class since 2019, a milestone that reflects the impact of the program on young people across the Greater Boston and Metro North region.

Over the course of the 10–12-month program, graduates passed the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) while earning industry recognized credentials in one of two tracks: Construction and Retail Entrepreneurship and Social Enterprise (RESE). Construction trainees earn a credential from the Home Builders Institute Pre-Apprenticeship Certification Training (HBI-PACT), while RESE trainees earn a credential in Retail Industry Fundamentals (RIF) through the National Retail Federation. This is the first year that the program has offered workforce training in entrepreneurship; an accomplishment recently featured in a Department of Labor Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act grantee webinar.

Construction trainees applied their craft to real community projects which included building a community fridge at the Elizabeth Peabody House in Somerville and restoring a staircase at a Green Street home in Cambridge. Retail Entrepreneurship students created innovative products, business plans, and prototypes ranging from foldable hangers to gaming platforms and a social media network, and pitched their ideas to local industry professionals. RESE trainees concluded their training with the establishment of a small business venture with a limited production run of cutting boards which sold out instantly.

“YouthBuild has not only given us a second chance to succeed but has gone above and beyond to help us strive for more and instill a mindset to reach and achieve beyond the regular,” said student speaker **Nethanya Douyon, a Retail Entrepreneurship and Social Enterprise graduate**. “From the teachers, counselors, and down to the curriculum, YouthBuild has been a safety zone to turn mistakes into success and success into greatness that once seemed unachievable.”

The celebration included remarks from program directors Nate Bae Kupel, Tom Rodriguez, and Andrea Chery, as well as **John Valverde, President and CEO of YouthBuild Global**, the headquarters for more than 320 local YouthBuild programs around the world. Valverde inspired students with a reminder of their place in a powerful global network: “Today you graduate, and you will be part of the more than 210,000 alumni of YouthBuild that we’ve had over the years. You are part of a force for good. Thank you for saying yes to YouthBuild. Thank you for taking a chance to improve your life in this way and make your family proud. All of us from all over the world of YouthBuild, we are super proud of you.”

During the ceremony, three individuals were honored for their contributions:

- Personal Growth Award: Mael Petit-Frere — Recognized for tremendous growth and resilience in completing the HiSET and credentials despite challenges. YouthBuild Advisory Board members shared “Your story inspires us all to keep growing and keep believing.”
- Leadership Award: Syon Ghimire — Celebrated for exceptional dedication and advocacy, inspiring peers by uplifting others and using their voice to make people feel seen and heard.
- Charlie Parker Award: Kat Baena Garces — Awarded to a staff member who exemplifies Just A Start’s mission. A former YouthBuild student herself, Garces uses her lived experience to strengthen the program and ensure students’ voices are always part of the conversation.



YouthBuild Just A Start graduates pictured with staff

Photo by Lee-Daniel Tran Photography



YouthBuild Global President and CEO John Valverde addressing graduates

Photo by Lee-Daniel Tran Photography



Student speaker & Retail Entrepreneurship and Social Enterprise graduate Nethanya Douyon addressing the crowd

Photo by Lee-Daniel Tran Photography



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About Just A Start:

Just A Start believes that access to stable housing and sustainable careers are the essential building blocks of equitable communities. For more than 50 years, we have focused on meeting the fundamental needs of individuals and families who have been systematically denied opportunities to realize their full potential. Our programs include affordable housing, education and job training, and comprehensive support services, spanning Cambridge and beyond. We have developed and currently maintain 600 affordable apartments. To keep community members housed, we also offer financial and technical assistance to prevent evictions, and support low- and moderate-income homeowners. Finally, we prepare individuals of all ages and circumstances with the skills and knowledge they need to secure fulfilling careers, leveraging their talents to achieve economic mobility and strengthen the region's workforce.