

College can end generational poverty

Written by Rebecca Rivas, Special to the NNPA from the St. Louis American
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One adult with a college degree can end the cycle of generational poverty in a family forever. However, fewer than nine percent of students from low-income backgrounds receive their bachelor's degree by age 24.

Pictured: Ayriel Hadley, who graduated from Saint Louis University in May, celebrated on Saturday with 35 other students of College Bound's first college graduating class at the Cap & Gown Ball at the Hyatt Regency downtown.

Ayriel Hadley graduated from Saint Louis University this May, and she is the first in her family to graduate from college. She said she wouldn't have been able to navigate the college process without six years of support from local nonprofit College Bound, founded in 2006.

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The whole college process and the friendships I've built through College Bound, they have been important in my life and development," Hadley said. "Without that, I'd either be working at a chain restaurant or worse. In my environment, there are a lot of ways to make money, but they aren't all legal and that's the sad truth."

On June 9, Hadley and 35 other students of the College Bound's first college graduating class celebrated together at Cap & Gown Ball at the Hyatt Regency downtown. These students come from low-income backgrounds and lacked the support they needed to navigate the college process.

I had been looking forward to it for weeks," said Hadley, who was also the keynote speaker. "It was better than my high school prom."

When Lisa Zarin founded the organization in 2006, she had just gone through the college application process with her own son. Her son had one counselor to every 20 students, and getting the paperwork together still felt overwhelming, she said. Counselors serving low-income neighborhoods often look after 500 students.

It just kept me up at night," Zarin said. "So I said I am going to figure out a way to bring the process and the privileges that kids from high-income backgrounds have to kids from low-income neighborhoods."

Today, College Bound is working with 469 students attending 39 local high schools and 70 colleges and universities throughout the country.

Their seven-year program begins at the end of a student's freshman year of high school and

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follows them through completion of college.

At the event, several students from the first graduating class shared their stories through a video.

They always said I was smart, but you just don't know. You've never seen anyone reach that level, so you don't think that you could," said Alexis Jamerison in a 2008 interview. She will graduate from Saint Louis University in December.

Nelson Dorvlo graduated from Lake Forest College in May.

We all came from the same situation but we made it out," Dorvlo said. "We all had the same dream of being somebody. College Bound brought us together to help us achieve that goal together."

Tanner Senter, who graduated from Lake Forest College in May, is the first college graduate in his family.

My father has been absent in my life," he said. "You hear about it on TV – a young black man without a father goes and becomes a criminal."

Every student who has gone through our program, they graduate from high school, and they go on to college," Zarin said.

This year, College Bound was one of 10 organizations – out of 374 studied – that the Education Policy Institute recognized as a "blueprint of success" for pre-college outreach programs. It was also the youngest organization selected.

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Zarin said some students entered the program with a 1.8 GPA.

These kids showed that if you gave them the resources, knowledge, support and love, they could totally do what they needed to do,” Zarin said.

Hadley said, aside from academics, she learned self-esteem and trust in people from the program.

Self-esteem came through building strong relationships with basically adult strangers. We trusted them with personal information. And it was a highly supportive environment. Even when you failed, they acknowledged that it occurred and it doesn't have to occur again,” Hadley said.

This program should be available for everybody not just people in St. Louis. It would bring up society. Because with all the outcasts, College Bound picks them up, polishes them up and puts them back in society, and that's what we need.”