



June 7, 2009

Rutgers program gives middle school students chance for college scholarships

By *SERGIO BICHAO*
STAFF WRITER

Fourteen-year-old Jason Gaines strikes most, including his mom, as someone incredibly well-spoken for his age.

But ask him about the Rutgers Future Scholars program, and the New Brunswick teen has to slow down to make sure he says exactly how he feels about the year-old program that each year will pluck 50 high-achieving students from each of the four municipalities with Rutgers campuses and put the teens on the road to obtaining a full scholarship to the university.

"The program is exciting. The program always has something new. The program is different. The program is something you never thought could happen," Gaines said in the office of the New Brunswick Lincoln Middle School's vice principal. "The program has just opened a new vision for me. It makes you want to push yourself and helps you do what you want to do in life."

About 200 eighth-graders from New Brunswick, Piscataway, Newark and Camden were selected last year to receive mentoring, educational support and cultural experiences from Rutgers University.

The students are chosen based on their academic aptitude and come from low-income households in struggling communities.

The program's goal, officials said, is to prepare and motivate these students for college, particularly Rutgers, which has offered each of them a full scholarship to the state university if they maintain their grades and work hard. Should they graduate from Rutgers in eight or so years, most of them will be the first in their families to earn a college degree.

Over the course of five years, until they graduate high school, the students will attend college classes and seminars in topics as varied as physics, forensic science, photography and writing – topics they might not normally touch in their school. They will get SAT tutoring and officials hope to give students the opportunity to earn college credit for some of these courses.

The scholars also were treated to Rutgers basketball games and Broadway shows, experiences they might not have had if not for the program.

University officials said they have raised about \$1 million in donations to fund the program, including a five-year commitment by pharmaceutical company Merck.

"This program is going to be an incredible opportunity for our youth in Piscataway who may not have had the dream of going to college but can now see a reasonable way of acquiring that dream given the financial (assistance)," said Deidre Ortiz, principal of Quibbletown Middle School in Piscataway.

The next 200 students chosen by their schools to participate packed a lecture hall on the Busch Campus in Piscataway with their parents Friday to meet university officials and first-year students.

"I love your T-shirts," a beaming President Richard McCormick told of sea of scarlet-clad seventh-graders. "They say 'Rutgers' on the front and '2018' on the back. . . And that's the goal. If you're willing to work very hard, get good grades, do well on your tests, you will be able to attend Rutgers and graduate in 2018."

The young scholars appreciate and understand the opportunity being granted them.

"We all thought about college but this puts you a step closer," said first-year New Brunswick scholar Lamont Higgins, 14, who dreams of playing football but will settle for aerospace engineering if the NFL passes him over. "With this program, you actually know that you'll be going to college."

Piscataway eighth-grader Alvaro Escalante told the incoming class that he was once a "typical trouble-maker.

"That was because in my mind I had already achieved success. I came to this country, I learned English, and I was probably going to graduate high school. That was more than either of my parents had achieved. In my mind I had surpassed any standards set for me.

"One day, early in the morning, I remember seeing a group of people standing on the corners waiting to be picked up to go to work. I realized that, if I didn't step up, that was the type of future that awaited me."

Jason said the program kept him out of trouble.

"Especially with a lot of gangs and peer pressure. We get to talk to adults about that and to stay focused in school. We feel like we have the support now, and we can do better in the future."

Program director Aramis Gutierrez said about 80 percent of the first group of scholars have maintained a B average or better. They also have increased their participation in extracurricular activities and their parents have become more involved in the schools.

While students must have good grades to be accepted into the program, Gutierrez said Rutgers accepted some students who didn't meet the initial criteria because officials saw an under-representation among Hispanic and black male students.

Gains made by these students are seen against the backdrop of their home school districts, which are among the most economically-disadvantaged and academically underperforming in the state.

For the parents of those who were chosen, it's a dream come true.

"I wanted to have the opportunity that she has," said New Brunswick resident Ana Santos, in her native Spanish, about her daughter, Herendira, who will become a Rutgers Scholar this summer. Santos, who came to the United States in 1997, completed the equivalent of middle school in Mexico before devoting her days to earning wages.

"I wanted my parents to have supported me like I am supporting her."

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