

REACHING ACROSS THE DIVIDE

BY SHELLEY DUBOIS and
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A Georgetown University program goes the extra mile to bring underserved middle schoolers through to college - and beyond.

photographs by Hector Emmanuel



CLOCKWISE, STARTING FROM TOP
Jeff Fleming, math instructor
Jamal Lowe, high school junior
Troy Dorsey, ninth grade student
Zaire Sadiki, ninth grade student





ominique Cauley, a tall African-American college student, commands attention when she walks into a small coffee shop at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. This self-assured history major looks like a natural for such an elite academic environment.

But back when she and a group of 7th-grade classmates entered a precollege program for local kids with average or below average grades and extremely limited resources, her chances of success were iffy at best. “We had so many deficiencies coming into the program,” says Cauley, “that I still marvel at how I ended up here.”

She adds, “I didn’t know exactly what I was getting myself into, but I knew there were people at Georgetown who were doing something, who had a dream, were accomplishing things, were doing what they wanted to do—and I wanted to be like them.”

Cauley, a 21-year-old junior at Georgetown University, participated in the Georgetown Institute of College Preparation for six years, starting when she was an 11-year-old at Ronald H. Brown Middle School. Every Saturday of the school year and weekdays during the summer, she and her peers trekked from one of the more severely stressed parts of D.C. across town to the prestigious Georgetown campus. There, they took SAT prep classes and acquired skills in math, science, English, and Spanish—along with the confidence to thrive at an academically demanding college.

The kids in the program face intense challenges—inside and outside the classroom. Their home turf, Ward 7, has the second lowest median income of the eight city wards—about \$33,000 per year. It is in

the far eastern sector of Washington, D.C., separated from downtown by the Anacostia River. In this predominantly African-American neighborhood, 30 percent of adults lack a high school diploma; just 13 percent have earned a bachelor’s degree and, according to a 2007 report of the D.C.-based State Education Agency, half of them are functionally illiterate.

From these difficult circumstances, three cohorts of students have completed the precollege program, graduating from high school in 1995, 2001, and 2005. Those who stick with the program do well; 98 percent of them (101 students out of 103) have gone on to college. Many choose historically black colleges and universities, such as Howard University and North Carolina A&T State University. Other graduates have attended Barnard College, Temple University, and Lafayette College. Six, including Cauley, have attended Georgetown.

Inevitably, some students leave the program before their senior year in high school, with attrition rates of 28 percent in the first cohort, 15 percent in the second, and 19 percent in the third. In the first group of 50 students, for example, 36 (72 percent) completed the program—and high school. Every one of those students attended college, and 85 percent of them earned an undergraduate degree. By stark contrast, only 43 percent of 9th graders in Washington, D.C., public and charter schools are likely to finish high school and only 9 percent will earn a bachelor’s

degree, according to a 2006 report commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, *Double the Numbers for College Success: A Call to Action for the District of Columbia*.

An Expanded Pre-College Education

This program’s achievements—recently recognized by a sizeable infusion of funds from a private donor—are largely due to the two inspired and tireless people who run it: Tom Bullock and Charlene Brown-McKenzie.

Bullock, who took the reins of the program in 1993 and revamped it in 1995, researched best practices for creating an environment where low-income minority students could succeed. He designed a model marked by small-group learning and students’ one-on-one relationships with their teachers. He was able to sell its merits to Georgetown and HHMI, tacking the program onto a broader Georgetown undergraduate science-education grant proposal to HHMI, which has been a source of support ever since.

Wanting to reach children from a D.C. neighborhood with great need, Bullock chose Ward 7. He worked with teachers at Ronald H. Brown Middle School to identify students who could benefit most and to figure out how best to complement the D.C. Public School curriculum. Each cohort of students remains a unit from 7th through 12th grade, which helps create a caring family-like atmosphere.

human larynx—and to instruct and indulge the students in singing.

He has also packed their Saturdays and summers full. In the summer before 9th grade, they fly to New York City to see a Broadway play. Before 10th grade, the program pays for students to study abroad—groups have traveled to Panama, Costa Rica, and Ecuador. The following summer, students take college-level classes while living in Georgetown dormitories. Before 12th grade, they visit colleges around the country and begin applying to schools. The summer before college,

Based on his thesis that good math and science students are generally good students all around, Bullock drafted a six-year math and science curriculum that also includes language arts, enrichment classes, and other educational benefits. For example, he brought in a dance instructor to teach the anatomy of the human muscular system and a vocal coach for students to study the physiology of the

students can take extra classes they might need before starting the main event.

Although Bullock is most proud of the program's ability to get these kids into college, one of its goals is to increase the students' interest in biomedical sciences, which is a work in progress. "We have increased the number of students who have gone into the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields over the years by continually improving the experiences and working more closely with the schools and families," Bullock says. "One of our students, Britney McCoy, has achieved great success in the sciences." She is now studying for her Ph.D. in engineering and public policy with a concentration in environmental management at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

McCoy, who graduated from the program in 2001, attributes her interest in air- and water-quality issues to an environmental science class Bullock offered one summer. "I was set on working in emergency medicine as a physician," she says. "But that one summer class allowed me to see that there are many career options. Instantly, I was drawn to environmental issues and never looked back."

LaToya Walker, a math major at Coppin State University in Baltimore, graduated from the program in 2005. She says going every Saturday helped her in school. "[Math professor] Jeff Fleming helped with my hard level math courses. I could bring my homework in to get help," she recalls. "I'm good at math. I kind of always knew what I wanted to be. But Mr. Bullock and Dr. Fleming helped me realize that I wanted to be it more. They said, 'you can do this.'" Her goal is to teach 7th-grade math.



Dominique Canley wants to take what she's learned back to her Ward 7 neighborhood.

Robb Schareteg

Surrogate Parents

Both Bullock and Brown-McKenzie grew up in places where few people pursued higher degrees, and neither has forgotten those beginnings, even as they excelled in their own education and careers.

Bullock, whose parents taught in D.C. public schools, graduated from an inner-city Catholic high school, attended the District's Howard University, and then transferred to Xavier University in New Orleans, where he studied physics. He returned to D.C. as an engineer, but he taught at D.C. Catholic schools on the

side. Teaching gradually became his focus and, in 1992, he joined Georgetown to teach mathematics in the Saturday precollege program, becoming director in 1993 of what was eventually renamed the Georgetown Institute of College Preparation.

Bullock soon realized there were huge physical, socioeconomic, and racial divisions between Georgetown's sophisticated milieu and these children's crime-heavy neighborhoods and often single-parent homes. "We came to Georgetown not even knowing that it was a part of D.C.," says Cauley. "We were convinced it was in Virginia, because we had never seen anything in the city that was this beautiful and well-maintained."

Sustaining such an arduous program would clearly require more emotional

support than Bullock could provide alone. So in 1999 he hired Charlene Brown-McKenzie, a D.C. social worker and Georgetown University alumna. An immigrant from Jamaica, she had some of the same experiences as the students in the program, including having attended a precollege Upward Bound program as a high school student in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

Bullock and Brown-McKenzie go above and beyond. They take students to get haircuts before college interviews, help move freshmen into their dorms, attend basketball games and weddings, and ferry students who don't have a ride to campus.

"We came to Georgetown expecting them to help us with precollege stuff," says Cauley, "but Tom became like a dad and Charlene became like a mom. If you didn't come for a couple weeks, you would get that phone call, asking 'What's going on in this child's life. What can I do to fix it?'"

Brown-McKenzie is now running the precollege program, as Bullock phases out of his central role to become more broadly involved with D.C. education. He is director of civic engagement for D.C. Education Compact, a community partnership committed to ensuring that District schools educate all District children. He is also the assistant to the president of Georgetown for D.C. Education Initiatives.

Both program leaders continue to pull together the dozens of parents, hire teachers, and enlist volunteers who make the program run. And both have a knack for seizing any opportunity; Bullock recruited the program's math professor, Jeff Fleming, a young African-American



Charlene Brown-McKenzie is looking for stand-out mentors to help her expand the program.

with a Ph.D. in mathematics, after striking up a conversation at choir practice.

Still, there have been limitations in what these two administrators, despite their dedication, could do. Given the enormous needs of the students, the program could add a new cohort of kids only once every five years or so. And despite its successes, there has still been that 15 to 28 percent attrition rate. Brown-McKenzie says this isn't surprising. "Fewer than 20 percent of these kids engage in any extracurricular activities," she says, "so we're happy to get the response that we do." As Bullock continues to work in the Ward 7 community, he says many of the students who left the program talk with him about the dwindling resources in their community and the challenges of staying focused amid the harsh socioeconomic realities of basic survival.



Paying it Forward

The program works with the students for one year after high school to help them navigate financial aid, sign up for classes, and adjust to living away from home—unfamiliar intricacies of college life that can discourage first-generation college students, even when they are academically prepared, says Brown-McKenzie. She visits campuses to help the kids navigate the transition and sends “care packages” with food and school supplies.

And she helps them confront the unpredictable. One woman who graduated from the program in 2005 moved five family members with her when she left for college because of problems at home. The student stayed in school while her family resettled; she gave birth to a baby the next year. Brown-McKenzie used

funding from the program to buy the young woman a laptop and printer so that she could work on assignments from home. The student is currently a junior in good academic standing.

While the program's formal help ends after freshman year, the informal support never stops. Even as he moves on, Bullock remains connected to the students he taught. "They reach out to me when they fall on hard times or just want guidance toward their goals. Because they still want to be successful, they come back seeking that support."

And once they've successfully realized their goals, these young people reciprocate; almost every graduate returns to the program to give back. LaToya Walker, for example, comes in on Saturdays to tutor current students. Alumni care about the community created through the Georgetown program as well as their hometown community in D.C.'s Ward 7. Perhaps one of the program's greatest achievements is connecting the two.

Despite the neighborhood's limited resources and numerous problems, it is in
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KIDS WHO DON'T MISS OUT

On a Saturday morning this past October, the 9th-grade students in Georgetown's newly named Meyers Institute for College Preparation trickled into a classroom in the campus Intercultural Center. A two-gallon jug of Sunny Delight sat on a table in the front of the room, next to stacks of plastic cups and SAT worksheets.

- **Whether slouching in their seats,** leaning forward over their notes, or perching with careful high school nonchalance, nearly every student participated in class, answering questions or commenting on others' answers. When most of the students clamored to debate a math problem on the board, a boy in the back wearing a hooded sweatshirt said the answer under his breath. The girl sitting next to him looked over and asked quietly, "You good at math?"
- **College is a high priority for these 9th graders.** When asked where they'd like to go, a soft-spoken boy named Derrick Thomas who plays bass drum in the school band and designs Web pages ran his hand over his hair and said, to the side, "I want to go far, far away." Tiara Mundaray has her sights set on Atlanta's Spelman College, an historically black liberal arts college for women.
- **These students clearly care about their education,** even amid many other commitments. Michelle Tate, a lean girl with a high ponytail, listed her responsibilities outside the program: "I play basketball, softball, I run track, I do community service at my recreation center, and sometimes when I've got free time I watch TV, help my sister out with her two babies, or go outside and be with my friends."
- **How does she stick with the program?** "It's just that we got to set our priorities about what comes first and what comes last," she said. "My education comes first." She tries to encourage her friends to get on board too. "I'm like, 'It's going to be fun.' And they just don't feel like it, and I say, 'Y'all are missing out.'" —S.D.

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many ways a nurturing environment that breeds loyalty. “People love to paint our community as if we’re all savages and kids are stealing cars and getting killed,” says Cauley. “But we grew up in a community where somebody else’s grandma would come outside and tell you to go into the house if it was too late. We watched each other’s children.”

McCoy agrees. “I wouldn’t change my background for anything,” she says. “I’ve gotten so much love and respect from the people back home.”

Moreover, the 24-year-old has met lots of young people in the neighborhood who wish to follow in her footsteps. “People come up to me saying, ‘You know, Britney, I’ve decided I’m going back to school’ or ‘I’m going to trade school. Can you help me?’”

Both McCoy and Cauley are willing to help, as both plan to return home and work in the community. Says Cauley, “I couldn’t see myself anywhere else, and I want to do for others what somebody else did for me. Maybe I’ll even be Tom when I grow up.”

The Next Chapter

The program is poised for big changes with a donation of \$10 million from Boston businessman Daniel Meyers, who learned about the program from Georgetown president John DeGioia. The newly renamed Meyers Institute for College Preparation will accept a new cohort every year for the next 10 years—no more five-year gaps between groups. The first of those incoming 7th-grade classes enrolled last fall. DeGioia says the


Institute will “allow Georgetown to strengthen [its] commitment to—and engagement with—the educational success of students in the District of Columbia.”

That means Brown-McKenzie needs more staff. With more than 50 new 7th graders each year, she will need an assistant program manager as well as separate middle and high school coordinators. She is determined to preserve the program’s intimacy by hiring colleagues who will match her devotion to the kids, and in that regard she is getting plenty of help. “Parents who’ve been in our program come and meet every candidate,” she says, “and we ask some of the alumni to come in too because they have an intuitive sense” of who has what it takes and who does not.

Bullock hopes that alumni will return to sustain the program. “These young people will lead the change in their community,” he says. “Some of them have already asked what it would take to start their own charter school so that such an experience isn’t just for a few kids at Georgetown on a part-time basis but one that happens Monday through Friday in a regular school setting. When I hear alumni say this, I tell them ‘If I die tomorrow, I will be just fine. I’ve achieved every possible dream I could have because of their success.’”

If the program grows according to plan, coffee shops surrounding Georgetown and other D.C. universities could be full of the confident voices of students with the same life experiences and drive as Dominique Cauley, who says she’s learned how to hold her own.

“There are certainly times on this campus where voices like mine aren’t heard. And if I have to be the one screaming it, I’m okay with it.” She smiles, “I’m so okay with it.” ■




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