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Students battling adversity

College journey eased with extra mentoring

By Jill Tucker

Kimberly witnessed her mother's murder. Al's father has been in prison his whole life and his mom died of cancer when he was 7. Vanessa helped her mother raise seven children.

Dalvin's dad was murdered, and his mom abandoned him. At 13, Francisco was shot in a drive-by.

Imani was the sole caretaker of her blind and critically ill mother.

With support and guidance from Students Rising Above, a local nonprofit, these Bay Area youth are now in college. But for many low-income and minority students who have had suffered trauma as children, financial aid and good grades aren't the biggest challenges.

College means they can escape their situation, but it also means leaving behind siblings, friends and family who are still stuck in cycles of violence, drugs and poverty. That stab of conscience combines with the need to adapt to a new environment where few understand the challenges they've overcome to get there.

"I think it is a form of survivor's guilt," said Clifton Hicks, a San Francisco psychiatric social worker. "Often this is a threat to the family system."

Who will take care of the new baby sister? Who will work to pay the rent? Who will look after younger siblings when dad goes back to jail or mom is too sick to get out of bed?

"These students are often the emotional glue that holds the family together," said Lynne Martin, executive director of Students Rising Above, which offers full-service support and advisers to selected students as they apply to, enter and graduate college. "It's not uncommon for families to try to sabotage a student's ability to go to college."

EDUCATION



Michael Short / Special to The Chronicle

Quanikki Van Hook waits as her daughter Imani Evans puts a shoe on her mother's prosthetic leg as they get ready to attend a family funeral.



Photos by Michael Short / Special to The Chronicle

Imani Evans comforts her mother, Quanikki Van Hook, during the funeral of Evans' great-grandmother Ernestine Shepherd.

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Or the students might undermine themselves with bad grades or self-destructive behavior, Hicks said.

Once they get to college, the students have to figure out who they are.

"Having to make peace with becoming someone new is difficult," said Lorna Contreras, a former participant and current adviser at Students Rising Above. "Having known yourself for the majority of your life as 'I am my mother's caretaker' or 'I am the son of a drug addict' and moving into 'I am unknown at the moment' is not an easy transition."

This is in part why typically one of every two low-income, first-in-their family college students don't finish their degree, Martin said.

Beyond financial aid

While many nonprofit organizations help students get to college, Students Rising Above helps students cope through college and as they start a career in the face of family demands and community pressure to remain loyal to those left behind. Ninety percent of the program's students earn a college degree.

The organization supports about 310 students who enter the program as high school juniors. Advisers help them navigate the college application process and obtain financial aid.

If they need medical care or counseling to battle depression, they get it. Students are sent to college with dorm-room supplies, computers and money they need to buy books or other necessities. When a student calls from Yale University in Connecticut asking for money for a warmer winter coat, the check's in the mail.

On average, the 15-year-old nonprofit spends \$5,400 on services and supplies for each student per year, not including staffing and administrative costs.

But money is a small part of the support.

"Low-income first generation kids need so much more than a tuition check," Martin said. "Most of the students have rarely seen a dentist. ... They don't know how to write a thank-you note, shake a hand or



Quanikki Van Hook (seated) hugs Imani Evans in the kitchen of their El Cerrito home.



Coming home for a family event means a seven-hour Greyhound bus ride each way for Evans, a student at Humboldt State University.

look someone in the eye."

At home they understand the rules and social mores even if they center on gangs, crime, drugs and public assistance.

"This is how they make sense of the world," Hicks said. "It's terrible and it's horrible, but this is their lives."

The staff at Students Rising Above gets that — and helps students bridge the two worlds.

Advisers communicate with their charges at least once a week and help them stay in school despite seemingly insurmountable situations, which have ranged from dislike of a

privileged roommate to the death of a boyfriend killed in a drive-by back home, Martin said.

The urge to go home

College freshman Imani Evans wanted to drop out the first week of college at Humboldt State University.

The El Cerrito teen had long been the caretaker of her diabetic mother, Quanikki Van Hook, who lost her eyesight and a leg to a disease that also damaged her kidneys and heart. Her heart pumps at 20 percent capacity and she is regularly in

dialysis.

As a teen, living on food stamps in public housing, Evans cooked and cleaned and tended to her mother when she wasn't in school.

"I wanted to go to college," Evans said. "I wanted to get out and try new things."

Yet she knew her 42-year-old mother could die at any time, and that she plans her memorial service on the nights her heart feels funny.

It was hard to leave her. At times, it has been harder to stay.

During Evans' first week at Humboldt, her mother was hospitalized. Right after winter break ended, Van Hook had a heart attack. In between, her health was up and down.

Contreras, Evans' adviser, guided the teen through the rough moments and reminded her of her goals and of her mother's support.

"She's my best friend," Van Hook said of her daughter. "But I had to support whatever dream she had. I didn't want her to sacrifice any dreams for me."

Learn more

To learn more about Students Rising Above or to donate to the organization, go to studentsrisingabove.org.

Some of the guilt of leaving has been eased by other family members and friends stepping in to help with her care. Van Hook credits Students Rising Above for keeping her daughter's dreams alive.

Evans stayed in school. She is considering a major in social work.

The worry is ever present, but she has friends and a first boyfriend.

"If my mom wasn't understanding or basically didn't love me so much or prepare me so much, it probably wouldn't have gone so well," Evans said. "She's done so much to get me where I am now."

Help from advisers

But even ensuring the students earn a degree isn't enough, Martin said. Too many graduates were returning to their communities and getting jobs that didn't need a degree.

The pull toward home and overwhelming guilt remain strong. So advisers help them get summer jobs, build resumes and make a career plan, Martin said.

"These students are diamonds in the rough," Martin said, emphasizing that the "rough" part can be pretty rough. "I think it takes so much more than access and affordability."

Evans and her mom know that more than most.

"I couldn't have prayed for it," Van Hook said of the financial, academic and personal support Evans has received from the Bay Area nonprofit. "It would have been asking too much."

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