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Philadelphia High School Mentoring Program

Gives Students a Head Start

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Philadelphia High School Mentoring Program Gives Students a Head Start

Ever since she was a girl, April Taylor has known she has wanted to become a doctor. A pediatrician, to be exact. Thanks to Philadelphia Futures, an innovative mentoring program, April's dream has been brought closer to home.

This fall, against the odds, April will be going to college.

In the spring of 1997, Philadelphia Futures matched April with Jefferson Medical College's Office of Health Policy as her mentor. The Office staff provided a somewhat unorthodox "group mentorship," whereby staff collaborated to provide her with as many insights as possible toward her career interest, says David Nash, MD, MBA, Director of the Office and Associate Dean of Health Policy.

College itself was once a dream for April, a bright and motivated student attending a Philadelphia city school, but statistics pointed to the unlikelihood of a student with her background, including a family who was financially strapped, even graduating high school.

Early in her freshman year, however, Philadelphia Futures staff came to her school with a message of hope: its core program, Sponsor-a-Scholar (SAS), would provide promising, economically disadvantaged city students with mentoring, financial incentives, and a year-round curriculum of academic skill-building and enrichment. In the presentation, April learned that the goal of Philadelphia Futures is to help guide a student of academic promise from the Philadelphia schools into the college of his or her choice, and to provide examples of the professional world the student aspires to enter. She knew she wanted to be a part of it.

Four years later, not only has April graduated high school, she is on her way to Penn State in the fall and already mapping out her pre-med courses, she says.

Asked how her involvement with the program has influenced her, April is quick to respond that it has helped provide her with concrete skills and tools she needs to achieve her academic and career goals. In addition, she says, she has achieved a greater understanding of what it takes to make dreams reality: opportunity, hard work, and "the knowledge that at least one respected person who is successful in life has faith in you." For example, she cites the dual encouragement of Futures' staff and of the Office in helping building her resolve and self-confidence.

Helping confirm April's hunch that a career in medicine was right for her was Futures' Health Professions program. Health Professions, explains Raisa Williams, coordinator for the program at April's school, William Penn High, is one of several professions-focused programs developed by Futures to help channel students to the field they gravitate towards. This is achieved through matching students with mentors in their stated field of choice and through immersing students in the daily activities of these professionals. For example, April and her classmates shadowed physicians at Temple Hospital for a week, staying overnight in dorm rooms. "Beyond doctors, nurses, and dentists, most children don't know the vast opportunities available in healthcare today," says Williams.

Susan Howell: Philadelphia High School Mentoring Program

Since its inception in 1989, over 500 students have participated in Philadelphia Futures. Given the obstacles that students from low-income backgrounds face, as compared to their more affluent peers, the program's statistics are all the more dramatic: Futures' four-year graduation rate is 98%, and 92% of the SAS students attend college immediately after graduating high school. What's more, close to 100% of the graduating seniors in April's class, the SAS class of 2001, will enroll in college in the fall.

Thanks to her mentorship with the Office, says April, many doors have been opened to her. To her surprise, she has also learned that there are "more opportunities in healthcare than she ever imagined." Nonetheless, she has remained steadfast in her desire to become a pediatrician.

Philadelphia Futures is but one of a number of mentoring programs nationally, including The National Mentoring Partnership. The Partnership is an advocate for the expansion of mentoring and a resource for mentors and mentoring initiatives nationwide. More information is available at <http://www.mentoring.org/yourcommunity/programs>.

For more information on Philadelphia Futures, please call Joyce Mantell at 215-790-1666, extension 13, or visit their web site at www.philadelphiafutures.org.

About the Author

Susan Howell, MS, is a mentor for the Philadelphia Futures program.