

Philadelphia Futures: Doing What It Takes for Low-Income Students To Be First in Their Family to Attend College

By Bonnie Eisenfeld

In a high school in a low-income neighborhood somewhere in the Philadelphia School District, a teacher or counselor recognizes a student's promise and potential and recommends that student to be a participant in a Philadelphia Futures program. A door of opportunity has just opened for that student. Sponsor-A-Scholar (SAS), a flagship program of Philadelphia Futures, a non-profit located at Broad and Locust Streets, provides valuable and effective support services and resources to low-income students with college potential, known in the program as "Scholars," who would be the first in their families to attend college. The organization matches the Scholar with a mentor and sponsor, and provides individualized and group academic enrichment and college guidance throughout the four years of high school, doing whatever it takes to enable the Scholars to get into college. Once in college, the organization provides financial, social, emotional, and other support to help them graduate.

Starting with ninth graders, the staff at Philadelphia Futures, headed by Joan C. Mazzotti, Executive Director, organizes and provides after-school and summer classes, SAT preparation, enrichment experiences, individualized college counseling, campus visits, career counseling, and more to each Scholar. Volunteer mentors are trained and matched with Scholars and remain with them throughout high school, meeting with them at the Philadelphia Futures office for one-on-one sessions, motivating them, encouraging them, and helping them find the resources they need. Sponsors each donate \$7,500, spread over four years, for college expenses. Philadelphia Futures has established partnerships with several Pennsylvania colleges who support SAS Scholars financially and academically. Scholars are expected to participate in Philadelphia Futures activities and to work hard on the assignments from their regular school and from Philadelphia Futures classes.

In June of each year, Philadelphia Futures holds a special ceremony to honor the high school and college graduates for that year. For the high school graduates and



Philadelphia Futures Graduation Celebration was held on June 6, 2013, at the Pennsylvania Convention Center. 55 high school graduates are shown in the photo. Another 50 students received their college degrees, a record-setting number.

their families, graduating from high school and being accepted into college is a major life milestone. For the college graduates and their families, this moment marks an achievement they might have only dreamed of.

Participants in Philadelphia Futures programs come from a variety of ethnic groups, including African-Americans, Latino-Americans, and Asian-Americans. In some cases, their families speak a different language at home, and these Scholars are translators for their parents. Urban young men and women of color living in poverty are most at risk for many social and economic problems. Young men in particular face enormous peer pressure to get involved in harmful activities. To combat these pressures, Philadelphia Futures developed the Young Men's Initiative, a series of activities specifically for boys, including building leadership skills and personal responsibility, exposure to positive male role models and career opportunities, and participation in a positive peer group of college-bound young men through the Leadership Roundtable monthly meetings.

Philadelphia Futures publishes and distributes more than 40,000 copies of the *Step Up to College Guide*. The organization's Office of College Retention

and Success provides counseling, financial support, and guidance to Scholars enrolled in college. Recently, the College Connection Program and the Outreach Futures Services were added. College Connection offers individualized guidance to high-achieving students in Philadelphia's public, public charter, and parochial schools starting in 11th grade. Outreach Futures works with community partners to offer customized programming, workshops, and resources to Philadelphia high school students and their families.

Well-known educator Marciene Mattleman founded Philadelphia Futures in 1989. In 2011, White-Williams Scholars, another non-profit with similar objectives that was founded in 1800, merged with the organization. Since the first Sponsor-A-Scholar class was recruited in 1990, more than 1,000 scholars have completed the high school portion, and almost 100% have attended college.

The Philadelphia community supports Philadelphia Futures work through mentoring and sponsoring Scholars, financial donations, other volunteering, and providing summer jobs and internships. To learn more about Philadelphia Futures and how you can help, please go to <http://www.philadelphiafutures.org/>