

Highhopes

Duquesne Program Aims to Change Economic Outlook of Region Through Students



African-American unemployment has historically been high in Pittsburgh. When the latest census figures were released in 2000, the numbers showed no improvement: unemployment among Pittsburgh area African-Americans pushed over 12 percent—three times that of Caucasians—and the Pittsburgh region had one of the highest unemployment rates for urban African-Americans in the country.

A new program at Duquesne University is committed to changing those numbers and altering the region's economic future, not through an infusion of capital, but rather an investment of time in area high school students.

Career Literacy for African American Youth (CLAAY), a career and college exploration program operated through Duquesne's Institute for Economic Transformation, matches students with mentors and tutors to plot a course of action for the students' futures.

"They helped me get here," said Jessica Taylor. "Without them, it wouldn't be possible."

While Taylor attended Peabody High School in Pittsburgh, her CLAAY mentor assisted with college applications. CLAAY pointed her toward a scholarship and the College of St. Mary in Omaha, Neb., which has a special program for young mothers. Now, Taylor is a freshman on a full four-year scholarship at the Catholic college, balancing her double major in special education and elementary education with the needs of her three-year-old son, D.J.

This year, CLAAY is making a difference in the lives of 150 students in Langley, Oliver, Peabody, Perry and Taylor Allderdice high schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, McKeesport Area in Allegheny County, and Aliquippa and Beaver Falls in Beaver County. Next year, Dr. Vernon Tipton, Ed.D.'03, director of the program, hopes to touch 450 students in even more schools.

The program offers high schoolers a shot at a better career and, ultimately, a better financial outcome. The program includes tutoring, reviewing for SATs, and prompting students to consider steps along their career paths, whether it's a job after



Cameron Brown with Kristen Bedillion, his mentor.

high school or a career after college. The program includes guest speakers, a legal study case and an annual recognition event. This summer, select students will take a Southern civil rights tour.

CLAAY is a collaboration of Duquesne University, the Heinz Endowments, state Rep. Mike Veon's office and the Beaver Initiative for Growth, and a number of local firms, plus government officials and school administrators, teachers and students

But CLAAY's heart comes from volunteer mentors, many of them Pittsburgh area attorneys, who carve out time to help students choose and stay on a career track.

The initiative was launched two years ago with 64 students because African-Americans living in Pittsburgh had more difficulty finding jobs than African-Americans in other large cities, said Barry Maciak, executive director for Duquesne's Institute for Economic Transformation.

"If our region is successful in increasing the rate of young African-Americans entering the workforce to the levels achieved

in Miami or Dallas, we will add nearly 10,000 African-American workers to the regional labor pool," Maciak said. "This is a complex issue to solve but we feel that the program is a step in that direction."

CLAAY aims to provide the region with an educated workforce while students

realize their aspirations, said Megan Grabski, GB'99, manager of Duquesne's Workforce Development Initiatives in the Institute for Economic Transformation. To do so, it focuses on an oft-ignored group: average students, what Tipton calls "the forgotten middle." They get by in

school but aren't at the top of the class. They don't cause trouble, they don't draw attention to themselves. And they aren't necessarily pushed to their potential.

"If you target the middle, you're really targeting where the bulk of students are," said Jeremiah Jackson, outreach coordinator in Langley, Taylor Allderdice and Peabody.

A lack of information has kept these students from doing their best, Tipton said. Planning, confidence and family support

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Opposite foreground: Nakia Dillard with mentor Erin Stamerra. Background: Antoine Pendleton with Robert Ray, his mentor.

Students at Perry Traditional Academy on Pittsburgh's North Side recently revealed what the CLAAY program means to them:

"The CLAAY program helps me prepare for college and allows me to explore different career options. The program provides a mentor that helps me and guides me as I make important decisions."

Jonathan Menefee

"The CLAAY program, to me, is a great program to be a part of. It made me become more focused on five years ahead, dealing with my education and also with my career. The CLAAY program also made me a mature young man."

Cameron Brown

"It means a lot because it can help me and give me different opportunities."

Arquita Coleman

"CLAAY means to me getting my questions answered and getting ready and prepared to go to college and get the job I'm aiming at."

Nakia Dillard

"The CLAAY program has helped me decide on a career choice which is to become a physical education teacher for an elementary school."

Nate Hollis

"The CLAAY program helped me to get to a better view of my future."

Antoine Pendleton

"To me, the CLAAY program means another opportunity to broaden my knowledge of life. It's also a chance to work with my mentor and an architectural firm."

Robert W. Lay

"The CLAAY program helped me in more ways than one. CLAAY has helped me in deciding my career choice and what I want to do in life. I hope to pursue a career in journalism and CLAAY has helped me confirm that."

Corey Carrington

"The CLAAY program has helped me to prepare for college and my career interests, and I am proud to be a part of this program."

Dalmar Kirk



Dalmar Kirk with Nathan Croumer, his mentor.

could be lacking. Reading and math skills or test scores might need to improve. For these students, the mentor program lights the path to a brighter future.

"With a little bit of information, support and direction, they are able to step out and do the kinds of things that make them be productive citizens," Tipton said. "It's a self-fulfilling prophecy in a positive way. You tell them they can move forward and, given the resources, guess what? They move forward."

So, one student at a time, CLAAY is preparing a workforce, for the benefit of individuals and the region. Mentors and students follow a special curriculum that has students research careers, prepare resumes, visit work sites and job shadow. Mentors and students alike embrace the program.

Mentor Todd Allen knew he'd find a way to fit CLAAY into his crowded schedule. A Beaver Falls school board member, Geneva College communications professor and doctoral student at Duquesne University, he didn't see any choice.

"After everything everyone has invested in me, it would be selfish not to invest

in someone else," said Allen. "It's just an outside voice that's saying, 'We believe in you. You've got support.'"

"Many of the reasons why we've gotten where we are, are because of our connections," said mentor Jamie Tuite, a lawyer at Buchanan Ingersoll LLP downtown. "So these students, who otherwise wouldn't have the opportunities and connections, we're hoping to get them more connected and plugged in."

Making the time to mentor twice a month is a challenge, but the payoff is tremendous.

"It just automatically makes you more blessed, and you realize the different blessings you have," Tuite said. "It's a relationship and it's a friendship, and out of that, you benefit."

In CLAAY, Kirkpatrick and

Lockhart Nicholson Graham LLP found a way to expand its diversity program and impact the community over a long period of time, said Carl Cooper, chief diversity officer for the firm. The lawyer-volunteers plugged into the initiative because staff handled the tutoring, leaving volunteers to focus on mentoring.

"This way we'd have a one-two punch

"With a little bit of information, support and direction, they are able to step out and do the kinds of things that make them be productive citizens."

to add to the student for academic performance and employment prospects," Cooper said.

Benjamin Kail, a Kirkpatrick Lockhart mentor also sees his student outside of the program. "If you give a teenager access to a mentor or an older guide I think most of them will take advantage of it," Kail said.

"They just need some opportunities to keep them focused," said Kibwe Lebna, student services assistant for Pittsburgh Public Schools, who is lobbied by students wanting to join. Participants, he said, become accountable and more responsible for what they want to achieve. "They really

she admitted, "I kind of expected it." "They told us shortcuts and how many problems we needed to get the score we wanted," Monet said. "I was kind of confident."

Monet's participation was a given, said her mother, Monique. "Sometimes there's just not a choice if she doesn't want to have to hear me," she said. "I don't want to overbear her with things, but she needs to use the resources available."

For 15

Aliquippa High School and 15 Beaver Falls High School students, CLAAAY is a new resource introduced to Beaver County, through the support of Veon.

"They really believe they can do it now, instead of people just telling them."

thanks to his mentor.

"Instead of telling me what to do, she makes suggestions," said Corey, a two-year participant. "She talks to me like I'm at her level; she's not talking down. I wouldn't really say it's hard work, because I like thinking about the future. I like to be prepared."

That's one of the program's big lessons, said Dr. Julia Stewart, director of vocation education and special projects for McKeesport Area School District. "They learn that it's important to set priorities and meet deadlines and learn how to schedule their time so they can use their time as a resource, a valuable resource they don't want to squander. And they learn to plan ahead."

The program overcame students' initial hesitation in its inaugural year at McKeesport, Stewart said. At first, "kids sort of looked at us; they didn't understand, I don't think, what good things the program could do and that they would enjoy it. The longer they stayed with the program, the more encouraged they are.

"I couldn't have asked for a program to go more smoothly," Stewart continued. "The people at Duquesne University honestly have their act together. They're very, very aware of what happens in a high school and they work well with the constraints of the situation. That, in and of itself, is just amazing."

The program's success rests on the trust built between students and mentors and self-motivation for students to follow their interests, said Kelly Glass, CLAAAY site coordinator at McKeesport, Oliver and Perry. "A lot of them, they're the first person in their family to go to college or to think about going to college. One of my young men, he's the first one in his family to graduate from high school."

One student at a time, these CLAAAY participants can bring a wave of change. "We're talking about good, productive citizens, not only for the commonwealth but for the country," Tipton said. "That's what this country is about, maximizing your potential."

If you're interested in more information about CLAAAY or becoming a CLAAAY mentor, contact Dr. Vernon Tipton at tiptonv@duq.edu or 412.396.1143. ■

By Karen Ferrick-Roman



Perry Traditional Academy students participate in the CLAAAY program. From left to right: Nathaniel Hollis, Corey Carrington, Dalmar Kirk, Jonathan Menefee, Cameron Brown, Nakia Dillard, Jordan Sales, Robert Lay.

believe they can do it now, instead of people just telling them," Lebna said.

Monet Olivis embodies that kind of change. She plugged through three-hour SAT review sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays for more than a month, foregoing the cash she could have earned at KFC to study that "kind of boring, SAT stuff."

Her SAT score soared by 120 points and

"You've got to do a lot of thinking," said Tarray Childs. "It's helping us with our education, so I'll pretty much do what it takes."

Tarray loved his job shadow with an architect. Corey Carrington, a junior at Perry, is on fire to be a journalist after shadowing a newspaper reporter. He's turned toward tougher English classes to reach his dream,