

Daring to dream BIG

By Gabriella Boston

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Imagine being surrounded by violence, drugs, teen pregnancy and a 50 percent high school dropout rate and still staying focused enough to earn a 4.33 grade-point average (A+)?

Ashley Jones and ReDonah Anderson, both 18, don't have to imagine. That scenario describes their east-of-the-Anacostia River neighborhood and their own ability to succeed in the midst of it.

We know we want something better, something more. Going to college is part of that," says Miss Anderson, whose father was shot to death when she was 4 years old. "At Hoop Dreams, they talk about not letting your circumstances define you and to dream big."

Hoop Dreams? It's a District-based program that not only awards scholarships to deserving and economically disadvantaged students in Wards 7 and 8, but also provides them with professional mentors, SAT prep classes and internships of up to a year. Miss Anderson and Miss Jones are both Hoop Dreams scholarship recipients.



Hoop Dreams photo by The Washington Times
H.D. Woodson High School senior Ashley Jones (right) and her mother, Marlene Jones, are optimistic about the younger woman's future because of her own determination and the opportunities provided by Hoop Dreams, a program that offers students mentoring, scholarships and SAT prep.

"When we started 10 years ago, the main focus was to raise scholarship funding to ensure that these bright kids had the resources they needed to go to college," says Susie Kay, founder of Hoop Dreams.

She founded the nonprofit group while teaching American government to 12th graders at H.D. Woodson High School in Ward 7. It began as a charity basketball tournament to raise scholarship money. (This is the only connection the group has to basketball other than being named after a 1994 Academy Award-nominated documentary by the same name.)

The group has grown since then, and Ms. Kay, whose work experience also includes being a Capitol Hill staffer, had to quit teaching several years ago to run the organization, which raises about \$1.4 million a year. Each student receives \$1,000 to \$5,000 in scholarship money. Students can reapply for more money as long as they're in college.

"When I started Hoop Dreams, it was really an extension of what I was already doing, building bridges between the students' world and the world I would return home to every night," says Ms. Kay, who in the early and mid-1990s was the only white teacher at the school. "This was during the crack epidemic, the O.J. Simpson verdict. ... There was so much mistrust, and I wanted to do something about the huge disconnect between perception and reality. I wanted the two worlds to interact."

Money was a start, she says, but to be prepared for the world beyond their immediate surroundings, the students needed more than that. "So we started the internship program and the mentoring," Ms. Kay says. "I learned that if students weren't ready for college and the outside world, they'd just boomerang," meaning not make it in the "real world" and just go back to what they knew.

In Miss Jones' family, for example, nobody has finished college. Her link to the college world is her mentor, Sabrina Munnings, 26, a CPA and graduate of Howard University.

"I can offer her a different perspective," Ms. Munnings says. "I can answer questions she may have about college life. I can help her with scholarship applications."

Ms. Munnings and Miss Jones meet several times a month, usually at a Starbucks at a downtown Barnes & Noble store. There are things Miss Jones doesn't need help with, though, such as energy and motivation, Ms. Munnings says. "She's a huge self-starter and really driven. It's inspirational to me," she says.

Does she think Miss Jones will do well in college?

"I have no doubt," Ms. Munnings says.

Another way to make sure the students don't "boomerang" is to prepare them for the work force. This is why Hoop Dreams helps students find internships of up to a year's duration during their senior year in high school.



Miss Jones, 18, intends to be the first in her family to graduate from college. She is gaining professional skills through an internship at the D.C. Office of Tax and Revenue.

Miss Jones works for the District's Office of Tax and Revenue, and Miss Anderson has an internship with the U.S. Department of Commerce.

"It's great. You learn to handle yourself in a professional environment," Miss Jones says.

Adds Miss Anderson: "You learn how to dress and how to talk. Like you can't come in and say, 'Hey what's up, girl?' You have to be professional."

They spend about three hours each weekday at their respective internships, where their tasks include filing paperwork and typing documents. In addition to going to school -- they go to Woodson -- and doing their internships, the girls also attend frequent Hoop Dreams workshops. They have been accepted to several colleges already, including the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, but they are still waiting to hear from Philadelphia-based Temple University, which is their first choice.

Since its founding, Hoop Dreams has helped send about 800 students to college, and Ms. Kay estimates that at least 200 have graduated.

Why not more? "Because this is no traditional four-year experience for most of them," she says. "Many take anywhere from five to eight years to finish, but that's OK."

Take Donald Jackson, 27. He has been taking college courses for almost a decade, first at Howard University and now at Strayer University, which has a campus in the District.

"Ten years in school," he says and laughs. "That's a very long time, but I see the end approaching now, which is really nice."

He's hoping to graduate with a bachelor's degree in business administration in December.

The reason it has taken him so long, he says, is because he has worked full time throughout -- currently in the human resources department at the Department of Homeland Security -- and he even had to take some time off to take care of his mother, who has had major health problems.

Yet through perseverance, constant support from Hoop Dreams and encouragement from his parents (he names his father as his No. 1 role model), he says he never considered giving up on his education.

"When things happen, I just readjust and refocus," he says.

Mr. Jackson's case illustrates the uphill battle it is for many of the Hoop Dreams students to reach their academic goals, including just finishing high school, and how seemingly simple things can become insurmountable obstacles.

"These kids sometimes have to support their families. Some of them have to take several different buses to get to school. Many of them don't have health insurance," Ms. Kay says. She tells the story of a student who was afraid of mailing in a college application because the mailbox closest to home often got blown up.

"Most of us don't have to worry about things like that," she says.

Another mission of hers is to encourage the students to "dream big," she says. She does this by presenting motivational speakers.

"Part of what we do is try to infuse hope, provide tangible signs of hope," Ms. Kay says. Among her speakers are those who have come from similar backgrounds as the students.

Take Tiane Gordon-Mitchell, who grew up in a large, poor family in South Carolina but was the first in her family to go to college and is an AOL vice president for diversity and inclusion.

"Remember, if you're born on the ground, there's no place to go but up," Ms. Gordon-Mitchell said at a recent mentor workshop that students, including Miss Anderson and Miss Jones, attended. "I encourage you to dream big. ... Our problem today is that we don't dream big enough."



"It's amazing to hear where these people come from and where they are today."

-Ashley Jones

Miss Jones and Miss Anderson found her words inspiring. "It's amazing to hear where these people come from and where they are today," Miss Jones says. The two young women also have met News4 anchor Jim Vance, BET co-founder Sheila Johnson and Mayor Adrian Fenty.

The media personalities are of particular interest to Miss Anderson, who says she wants to be a broadcast media personality. Miss Jones wants to open a performing arts school.

All in good time, Ms. Kay says as a general caution.

"We tell them this is not about what you see in the movies," Ms. Kay says. "There is sacrifice and hard work. It's not about going straight to the top. ... It's not a Hallmark card."

Miss Jones and Miss Anderson say they know this but are not discouraged by the need to work so hard, sometimes much harder than others, for such things as securing funding for school.

"It just makes you try harder," Miss Anderson says. "That's all that obstacles do."

Her biggest fan, her 35-year old mother, Renee Anderson, a federal government worker without any college experience, says she would be happy to help secure a student loan for her daughter.

But her daughter, while appreciating the gesture, declines the offer. "No, I don't want to burden her," Miss Anderson says. "I need to do this on my own."

Not that Miss Anderson seems to need someone to dream big for her -- she says she wants to be the next Oprah.

"She's never been influenced by the crowd," her mother says. "She's determined and motivated and goes her own way. I know she's destined for something bigger."