

# Pointing to future with an eye on improving today

## EXCELLENCE AT A NONPROFIT The College Crusade of Rhode Island

BY KELLY RILEY

CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Since 1989, the dream of attending college has been coming true for thousands of the state's most at-risk youth thanks to The College Crusade of Rhode Island. Basically a college-readiness program, The College Crusade serves the communities of Woonsocket, Providence, Pawtucket and Central Falls, with participants coming from 32 of those cities' schools.

Even with a current enrollment of 3,500 students in grades six through 12, College Crusade President and CEO Todd D. Flaherty says one of the program's goals is to have a bigger reach into the poorest communities, "We wish we could bring in more kids, more families, and our vision is to grow and become a much bigger organization."

To be considered for the College Crusade program, the students must meet the eligibility for the school free or reduced-cost lunch program. Prospective participants must attend an orientation, then pledge to do their best academically, avoid trouble with the law, as well as school-age parenthood. Additionally, they promise to not use drugs or alcohol.

Those restrictions were not a hindrance for current program participant Edwin DeJesus, a senior at Central High School in Providence. "The College Crusade has taught me how to have self-discipline and self-respect, and most importantly has motivated me to do better and reach my full potential."

Students start the program with the Crusade Adventure and Academic Program. The goal of this piece of the initiative is to teach and encourage problem-solving, team skills, goal setting and decision-making. The skill-building is in conjunction with professional speakers, college visits, professional job shadowing, tutoring services, as well as peer and group mentoring.

Once the student – or Crusader as they are called – reaches high school, the available programs and options intensify in preparation for college. In addition to the available study skills and homework sessions, SAT preparation workshops, college fairs and career-exploration weekends are offered. Financial aid and college workshops are offered for both students and families.

Program support is available to the students beyond the school year as well. Programs and individual support continues after school, over school vacations and even during the summer break. The Saturday Academy is offered to Crusaders in order to concentrate on reading, writing and math skill improvement.

The College Crusade touts its



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**TEACHING THE CLASSICS:** Todd D. Flaherty, president & CEO of The College Crusade of Rhode Island, speaks to students taking part in the college preparatory program.

advisers as the "heart" of the program, and the response of DeJesus bears that out. "Every adviser shows love, respect and understanding so that each Crusader may have a chance to receive and understand the entire message the program is set out to demonstrate," he said.

Former Crusader (and Central Falls High School graduate) and current adviser at Providence's Central, Lorena Arango, sees the program from both sides and the picture is the same.

"I was a Crusader myself and benefitted a lot from the after-school programs, college visits, workshops and all the other programs I did," she said.

In her current role, she sees it as her job to "build our students up from middle school, follow them into high school, and assist them in many different ways to assure them they are able and deserving of a college education in order to ensure a better future for themselves and their families."

Selected based upon their own life experience, most advisers are from social and economic backgrounds similar to the students, with 90 percent of them from ethnic and or racial minorities.

The simple job description of the adviser is to monitor the students' progress in conjunction with teachers, keeping up attendance and grades while encouraging the stu-

dent to navigate a challenging course load. But it is more than that.

All college graduates, the 24 advisers have backgrounds in education and social work. Half of the advisers have completed the Crusaders program themselves. In short, they are role models and more for the students.

"The Crusade has become a second family to me," said Arango. "I have learned and witnessed how hard everyone at this organization works to make the Crusade what it is today."

This academic year, The College Crusade is starting a new form of support with its' Mobility Advisor program. These advisers provide support and guidance in schools where there isn't a high enough concentration of Crusader students to place an adviser. The students who have a mobility adviser communicate with them through text messages, social media, email, home visits and phone calls. The mobility adviser also organ-

izes groups of these students for programs and workshops that are available year round.

The program's results are impressive. Crusaders' high school graduation rate, at 70 percent, is nine percentage points higher than for all students in the communities it serves. Fifty-nine percent of Crusaders go on to college versus 42 percent of students from the poorest areas in

Rhode Island.

Once out of high school, Crusaders are eligible for college scholarships of up to \$3,000 per year for a maximum of four years. The money can be used at all public and private college within Rhode Island. Fourteen colleges in Rhode Island and New England also have pledged to provide donated scholarships to Crusaders.

In the past decade, The College Crusade has provided \$23.8 million in cash and donated scholarships to more than 3,000 Crusader high school graduates.

Another key to the success of the program is the involvement of Crusaders' families. In fact, Flaherty often refers to the Crusader program as "the Crusader Family." Nearly 50 workshops are specifically designed to help parents best support their child, with families required to attend two family engagement workshops per year. These workshops provide opportunities to develop social skills, emphasize the importance of secondary education, as well as provide information regarding financial aid options.

For the past 12 years, The College Crusade has been funded mostly by a United States Department of Education grant targeted to higher education readiness and early intervention programs. This funding has been renewed for another six years, during which time the Crusade will be able to dispense \$18 million in scholarships and other support.

It's an investment that will be bearing fruit for years to come. ■

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LORENA ARANGO

College Crusade adviser and former Crusader

