

Kaplan Program Helps 2-Year College Students Advance Their Education

By Caitlin McNamara
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BROOKLYN — Shakayla Lawrence, born and raised in Bed-Stuy, just finished her first year at Kingsborough Community College (KCC). She took four classes per semester while working 50 hours a week at two jobs. That was the schedule she needed to keep to pay her bills while finishing her associate’s degree. With competing demands on her time, Lawrence made frequent trips to KCC’s career development office, which is where she learned that a speaker would be coming from Kaplan Educational Foundation to talk about a scholarship program. The program selects “high-potential, low-income” community college students to mentor through their transition to a four-year university, and — most importantly — pays their tuition, beginning with their second year of community college. Lawrence attended the presentation and later applied. She was on her way to school when she learned that she had been accepted to the Kaplan Leadership Program (KLP).



Shakayla Lawrence

“I wanted to scream on the train!” she says. Lawrence, along with her fellow program “cohorts,” will complete her second year of community college under the guidance and encouragement of the program mentors. The students meet in Kaplan’s office each Friday to check in with one another, participate in workshops and complete group work. They take field trips to botanical gardens and museums, listen to guest speakers, and take advantage of one-on-one counseling and academic advising. “[KLP] has opened doors for me,” Lawrence says. “It makes you feel like you can accomplish things you never thought you could.”

Currently a mental health major, Lawrence hopes to become a child advocate. She has quit her full-time job at Bed Bath & Beyond and her parttime job at Victoria’s Secret to focus on summer classes. This fall she will begin applying to colleges, one of which she will enter next fall as a junior. She’s volunteering as a peer advisor, helping other KCC students set their class schedules.

Jennifer Benn, executive director of the Kaplan Educational Foundation, says that because the program is small, staff members work closely with each student to place him or her in a school that best fits their needs. The program arranges for students to visit colleges and helps with the decisionmaking process. Schools that have accepted program students include Cornell, Stanford and NYU, says Benn.

As of June there were 25 students in the program drawn from community colleges across the city and 11 alumni, all of whom are either employed in their fields or in graduate school. The students are African-American or Hispanic, and more than 75 percent are first-generation college students.

From Colombia to Mt. Holyoke

Rosa Frias is one year ahead of Lawrence. She just graduated from KCC after spending a year in KLP. On Aug. 31 Frias will be attending student orientation at Mount Holyoke, a liberal arts school for women in Massachusetts.

She will have difficulty being away from her dad, who she lives with in Midwood, but he has encouraged her to always do her best. This will be the next hard-earned step for her.

Seven years ago, living in Colombia, Frias watched her mother lose her struggle with colon cancer. Frias wants to become a surgeon, with the goal of providing healthcare to cancer patients and others in



Rosa Frias

developing countries.

Frias says of her mother's illness, "It was really hard to be in this position where I wanted to help but there was nothing I could do to help her physical condition, apart from be there for her." And her grandmother died just a few months before her mother. "It was really difficult. I want to do something meaningful for others who maybe don't have access to healthcare, to give them hope," she says.

Before she became part of the Kaplan program, Frias was also working two jobs, including managing a 3 a.m. shift at cDonald's three days a week just before her mid-morning class. Despite draws on her time and energy, she maintained grades that propelled her into the more rigorous honors track.

When she enrolled as a freshman at KCC, Frias planned to become a nurse, work for a few years and then apply to medical school. Now she'll be pre-med at Mount Holyoke, and her plans have been fast-tracked. "It opened my eyes that my dreams are not too far off," she says.

She has also quit both of her jobs. "I wanted to focus on my classes," she says. "Not just to get As, but to get something out of it. Going to talk to teachers was something I wanted to do but had no time. Before Kaplan, it wasn't an option to stop working."

Kaplan worked closely with Frias in helping her choose Mount Holyoke, where she will be studying neuroscience and behavior. One aspect of the school that attracted her, Frias says, is its willingness to welcome transfer students — a trait not common in all four-year schools.

"They really wanted us there. It's a very diverse school. There were Latina, Muslim, Asian women on campus. You know you'll learn another perspective of looking at life," she said. She added that "being in an all-women community is empowering."

Frias is sad to be leaving her cohorts, who have become close friends. "It's going to be really different not to see them every Friday," she says. But also, "We are all transferring to schools where the transfer population isn't very big, and we can share that and support one another," she says. The program helps students travel back home for holidays and to the annual reunion of the program in May.

Giving Back

"I think for all of us," Frias says, "our dreams won't be fulfilled until we can give back to our community."

Frias is already giving back. This year she taught SAT prep in Brooklyn's High School for Global Citizenship for two hours each Saturday. Frias is also teaching English via Skype to students in Colombia and Haiti.

This is quite an accomplishment for a girl who moved to Brooklyn speaking little to no English. She says simply, "You should be able to share the skills you have. I think giving back is very important."

Lawrence, at the beginning of her journey with Kaplan, is already seeing the long-term implications of her inclusion in the program. "My life has changed a lot," she says. "It makes me feel I have so much more of a secure future."

More information about the program is available at www.kaplanedfoundation.com. The next application deadline is Feb. 1, and applications will be available in September.