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by Janet Bingham
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Low-income students reaching new heights: College Summit offers the tools to succeed

Test scores couldn't tell the whole story. Neither could grades.

They couldn't tell about Rudionna Garza's growing-up years, the years she spent raising a younger brother and sister, washing their clothes, cooking them dinner, making sure they got to school.

They couldn't tell about her early memories, at age 7, seeing her father overdose from cocaine. "I watched from the doorway while he convulsed wildly on the floor. His lips were blue, and his eyes rolled back in their sockets."

They couldn't tell about a decade spent moving with her mother from house to house, school to school. "Since she was a drug dealer, a month or two was the longest we lived in one place."

Test scores and grades couldn't reveal these things, but Rudionna's college essay did. Her essay was so powerful that the Manual High School graduate was able to raise more than \$40,000 in college scholarships. She just completed her freshman year at Colorado College.

This summer, Garza, now 19, is helping high school seniors in the program that helped her: College Summit, a four-day intense summer workshop aimed at helping low-income students who soon may become the first in their families to go to college.

The program helps students highlight their strengths and the obstacles they've overcome "so that college admissions officers see the whole person, not just a standardized test score and a grade-point average," said J.B. Schramm, the East High graduate who founded the nonprofit program.

Colorado has the most participants of any of the seven states with College Summit programs. Since Garza took part in the program two years ago, it has quadrupled, serving more than 400 Colorado students. Ten Colorado colleges and universities will host the college immersion workshops this summer. Nationally, the program serves about 800 students.

The program condenses the six-month college application process into four intense days. Students live on a college campus, getting a taste of dorm life while tackling the college application process. They get one-on-one college counseling and complete a financial aid form and a common application – one that is accepted by all colleges. They learn to use the Internet to research scholarships. And they work in teams with writing coaches to complete an essay that can be submitted with both college and scholarships applications.

"Many of these kids don't think they can do it because no one they know has ever done it," said Pat Ludwig, a counselor at Manual High School. "They don't know where colleges are. Many have never been on a college campus. They erroneously believe they can't afford to go to college. They are very bright kids who don't know where to start."

That was the case with Gaza, who never dreamed she could attend an expensive and highly competitive private school like Colorado College.

She had no one at home to help her. By senior year she was entirely on her own. Her father was in prison. Her mother died that fall at age 35 of complications from AIDS. Her younger brother and sister were placed in foster care.

For part of that year she lived alone in an apartment, worked 40 hours a week doing telephone surveys, did her homework until midnight or 2 in the morning, and arrived at school bleary-eyed at 7:30 in the morning.

Despite these pressures, she took Advanced Placement classes, managed to play soccer and softball, and volunteered in the counseling office, helping other students to get ready for college. She graduated sixth in her class with a 3.99 grade point average.

Most of the 3,500 students who apply every year to Colorado College have high grade point averages, however. And Garza's score on the PSAT college entrance exam was a modest 1,000 – below the average of many of those applicants.

"If she had had abysmal test scores and grades, we wouldn't have admitted her. We would have seen her as too risky," said Roberto Garcia, associate director of admissions for Colorado College.

On the other hand if the college had looked only at the grades and test scores, "she would have been one of a thousand students like her."

It was the essay that revealed what set her apart, he said. "If you look at the hardships she had to endure consistently over time, if you see the determination and resiliency it took to meet those challenge, you realize this is a pretty extraordinary person."

Colleges, he said, are looking for people who show the strength and fortitude to excel no matter what the obstacle. The essay can help show that.

Not every student has a life story as dramatic as Garza's. But writing coaches at College Summit help students find their own story to tell, one that highlights their own strengths.

"I didn't have a clue about what to write on my college essay," said 18-year-old Mike Ealy. "At first I thought you had to tell about how great you were in high school, your many accomplishments." The trouble was, Ealy had not done very well during his first two years. One semester he got straight F's.

In his essay he told about the difficult transition from middle school, how he hadn't taken school very seriously, and how he'd come to a turning point where he decided he would stop hanging around with friends and instead go to a class.

After a successful senior year, earning A's and B's and not a single F, he graduated and was matched with a community college that doesn't require a particular grade point average. He just finished his freshman year at Northeastern Junior College in Sterling. This summer he has helped other students at College Summit.

Teachers and volunteers from local businesses are trained to follow the students throughout their senior year, meeting with them regularly to help them find scholarships and meet application deadlines.

Manual, where 80 percent of students qualify for federally subsidized lunches, was the first high school in the nation to contract for its own College Summit workshop, held annually at the University of Denver. Two senior executives from U.S. West, now Qwest, serve as writing coaches, and other employees volunteer as trained mentors during the students' senior year.

Manual pays half of the \$100 fee, with students or parents paying the other half.

Ludwig noted that most of the low-income students in College Summit have no one in their families to turn to for advice or help, and they need more individual attention than can be given by high school counselors who must see 300 to 400 students each year.

JoLynne Whiting, a vice president at Qwest Dex, has been a volunteer writing coach for College Summit. She was particularly humbled by working with a teen mother who fled an abusive husband to enroll in community college, and a former drug dealer who switched her allegiance to sports and academics. Both are now in college.

"You realize how much talent they have, how much courage they have. The fact that they have decided to make this commitment is just very impressive."

Garza in her essay said she wasn't sure what occupation she wants to pursue, but her mother's death from AIDS motivated her to learn more about medicine; her father's imprisonment motivated her to learn more about human behavior and the reasons people tend to get "stuck" in the prison system; and her brother's struggle – he hates school, whereas she found it a refuge – interested her in child psychology and the differences between children who have endured similar lifestyles.

"College Summit helps you add your life into that college application folder," she said, "so the admissions people realize that you don't have that traditional college applicant's life and experiences, yet you still have the ability to succeed and most times excel."