

S.P.O.V.*

* Student Point of View

Common Ground

How do you help inner-city kids who've never even heard of the SAT make it to college? A little Synergy just may do the trick. By STACY TOLOS, BS'07

I HAVE MORE THAN 20 CHILDREN, and I am just 21 years old. Rewind eight years and three weeks, and I'm an awkward middle-schooler serving as a counselor at a day camp for underprivileged Appalachian youth in rural Tennessee. This weeklong experience single-handedly shocked, scorned and spurred me toward a life of service.

Gary and Russell, the 6-year-old cousins under my charge, were the most generous human beings I had ever met. They had nothing in the way of material things, yet gave me more love—manifested through hugs, hand-holds, smiles, and small tokens gathered from nature—than I had thought possible. I began to believe I had wasted 13 years of my overprivileged life not emulating their example—giving of myself wholeheartedly to everyone and everything I could.

When I returned home I saw the world from a new perspective and understood that I had the capacity, personal resources and, most important, the commitment to give back to my global neighborhood. During this epiphany I decided to dedicate my life to the small task of changing the world.

I threw myself wholeheartedly into school

and community organizations. The Northeast Community Challenge Coalition in Cincinnati was one of the most meaningful and motivating. I took on responsibility for coordinating residential leadership conferences for my peers attending area high schools. Through countless presentations, relationship building and conference planning, I acquired knowledge of how people are motivated and cultivated an even stronger passion for service.

When it was time to apply to college, I knew I wanted to attend not just a leading academic university, but one that demonstrated a commitment to serving humanity and the public good. During my exhaustive search I found Vanderbilt and the Ingram Scholarship Program. As a result of the remarkable generosity of the Ingram family, there are approximately 50 Ingram Scholars each year spanning four classes at Vanderbilt.

I knew from the moment I received the acceptance notification that I wanted to hit the ground running when I arrived at Vanderbilt. I spent a great deal of time thinking

about what aspect of society I initially wanted to work on. I decided to reach out to a population that the Vanderbilt student community did not yet serve—one close to campus, and close to my age. Instead of giving more to the privileged students of suburbia, I wanted to provide resources to those who had the least public social and educational support.

It was not difficult to find a population in need, and after a few quick interviews with community leaders, it was not difficult to identify the specific need. The high-school students in the neighborhoods surrounding the Nashville inner-city neighborhood of Hadley Park needed help with the college preparation and application process. I already knew how to work with high-school students and how to apply to college, so I began researching college preparatory programs for under-resourced groups, combined the best practices into an organizational plan, and plunged in.

During my freshman year at Vanderbilt—two years ago—I founded the Synergy College Preparatory and Mentoring Program. I thought the word “synergy” defined my hopes for the program—“the interaction of two or more agents or forces whose combined effect is greater than the sum of their individual effects.” The program pairs two forces, Vanderbilt students and high-school students from the neighborhoods of Hadley Park, Tomorrow's Hope and Preston-Taylor Homes, to navigate together the daunting



DANIEL DUBOIS



NATALIE COX MEAD

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process of applying to college with the hope of simultaneously building strong, lasting relationships.

The Synergy mentees gave and continue to give the Vanderbilt mentors a more extensive, thorough education than we ever hoped to give to them. On the first day, the high-school students were asked to fill out some comprehensive information forms so we could understand their specific needs and pair them with an appropriate mentor.

The answers gave me a swift and sure reality check. Danielle, a junior at Pearl-Cohn High School, wrote that she wanted to attend Vanderbilt University so that she could become a janitor. Marcel, a senior in high school, indicated that he had never heard of the SAT or the ACT tests. Shanika, a junior, called me over as she was filling out her form, held her hand on her stomach nervously, and whispered, “Can I still be in the program if I’m pregnant?”

I would be lying if I said the mixing of the college students and high-school students

wasn’t awkward and uncomfortable at times. I thought the common humanity shared by Vanderbilt students and the Nashville youth would be enough to form the foundation for healthy, productive relationships. It wasn’t. But the uncomfortable occasions were what made Synergy successful at transforming people’s beliefs about each other, themselves, and their roles in the world.

Because of Synergy, Shawn, a Vanderbilt sophomore, shook hands with Tamara Jackson, a woman he might comfortably have called a “welfare queen” before this encounter. But sitting next to her at the kickoff pancake breakfast, he heard Tamara talk about how hard it was for her to find work and to take care of the four children her boyfriend had left her with. He listened as she exuberantly thanked him for taking the time to help her daughter with the college process. She simply didn’t have the time or the energy it required. Shawn learned to appreciate Tamara in a way no book or classroom lecture could have taught him.

Jasmine, a Vanderbilt junior, developed a great relationship with her mentee and is now majoring in human and organizational development with plans to enter a career in community development. She hopes to improve economic opportunities for the people in neighborhoods similar to the one in which her mentee lives.

My favorite thing about Synergy is its diverse collection of people. Admissions and financial-aid experts at Vanderbilt, Fisk University and Tennessee State University volunteer to give high-school students an insider’s look at the college application and payment process. A panel of African-American role models spent an afternoon explaining their struggles and successes to the mentees. The Commodore basketball team donated tickets for mentees to attend three games. The Vanderbilt University Theatre donated tickets for mentees to attend plays. Different ages, races, socioeconomic levels, religions and backgrounds synergize for the sake of shar-

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Mighty Oaks from Little Acorns

I READ THE ARTICLES IN THE SUMMER 2005 issue of *Vanderbilt Magazine* and appreciated your efforts to compile such an interesting array of subjects and photos. I was especially interested in the “Green Spaces” section [of the “Greetings from Vanderbilt” article, p. 51].

Since leaving Vanderbilt in 1966, I have enjoyed returning to campus just to walk around and view the lawn, shrubs, flowers and trees. Several years ago I purchased a seedling from the Bicentennial Oak on campus and planted it in my front yard. Each year I have taken a photo of the tree to track its growth. It is a source of pleasure to know a small part of the Vandy campus lives in my front yard.

DR. BILL ELIAS,
BA'61, MD'65, HO'65
Roanoke, Va.



Dr. Bill Elias, in September, with his prized tree, grown from a seedling of the Bicentennial Oak on Vanderbilt's campus.

Consider Us Lashed

FRIENDS, WE SPEND OUR WINTERS IN southern Arizona. To our knowledge, there is no town or city whose name is spelled “Tuscon” [Summer 2005 issue, “Scholarship Winner Globetrotts in Pursuit of Public Service,” p. 16]. The last time we checked, the

proper spelling is “Tucson.” A few lashes for your copy editor are in order.

CHARLES B. HOELZEL, PHD'60
Livingston, Texas

Magazine Appreciation

IN THE SPRING 2005 ISSUE OF *Vanderbilt Magazine*, you ran a photo of the Class of '54 banner at the '54 reunion [Homecoming and Reunion ad, p. 1]. I'm the fellow in the raincoat and sunglasses right behind the returning cheerleader in the black sweater. If I can have or purchase a copy of that shot, I'd appreciate it.

Thanks. You must be doing something right down there to keep the conservative contingent so upset all the time.

BOB SORRELLS, BA'56, MA'57
Rochester, Minn.

I JUST WANTED TO WRITE AND tell you how much I enjoyed the summer issue! Thank you for all you do to keep the alumni informed.

LISA NEAL, MED'94
Kennesaw, Ga.

Letters are always welcome in response to contents of the magazine. We reserve the right to edit for length, style and clarity. Send signed letters to the Editor, *VANDERBILT MAGAZINE*, VU Station B 357703, 2301 Vanderbilt Place, Nashville, TN 37235-7703, or e-mail vanderbiltmagazine@vanderbilt.edu.

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game. Throughout the SEC season, she made that big save in tight games to keep us in the match. Sometimes they were saves so big, she ignited our team and our play instantly improved.”

In the classroom Griffin is an economics major with a minor in financial economics. Her summer internships have given her good insight into the world after college. She ran her own painting business for a summer in Charlotte—a good experience, but one she doesn't plan to repeat any time soon. The hard-

est part was having charge of her own employees. “They never do what you say. I'm sure that's what our coaches are saying right now: “These soccer players don't ever do what we say.””

The city of Nashville also turned out to be a good fit for Griffin. A self-taught guitarist, she enjoys country music and has a particular fondness for Reba McEntire and The Judds. “It's been fun living in Nashville. Any night you go out, there's music downtown. Every now and then somebody big will be playing. It's a great environment if you like any music.”

One might even say it's serendipitous.

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ing resources and our common humanity. We come together because we love people and want to help them. We leave with a deeper understanding of people's lives, experiences and circumstances.

Just as the Nashville high-school students really only need information they lack about standardized tests, applications, scholarships, financial aid and shower shoes, Shawn and the rest of us really only need firsthand information about how other people live in order to respect our mutual humanity and desire to improve each other's life experience.

Two years after the founding of Synergy, I can tell you confidently that it has been a wild ride. I've laughed until I've cried. I've cried until I've laughed. I speak for all the mentors and individuals who helped make Synergy possible when I say that I love these youth. I worry about them, I feel happy for them, I feel sad with them. I want society to pay more attention to them, and I intend to spend my life reforming the systems that will increase their opportunities and improve their lives.

I would like to continue relaying the stories of “my children” and their mentors, but I have to go now. James has been skipping school. I need to call him and make sure he is planning to attend tomorrow. Shanika's baby is turning 6 months old Tuesday, and I promised I would bring one of the Harry Potter books for her to read to him. And my paper for Public Policy about reforming the U.S. public education system is due in less than 24 hours. ...

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hope. That they will tell her something true about the suffering she will face in her life. But most of all, I want them to instill in her a belief that a happy ending isn't a cheap convention of a dime-store novel. It's the moment of affirmation life is always seeking, the movement toward unity with God. And even if it's only between the covers of a book, I want her to believe that a happy ending is, in fact, always possible.

Without that possibility, life wouldn't be worth living.