

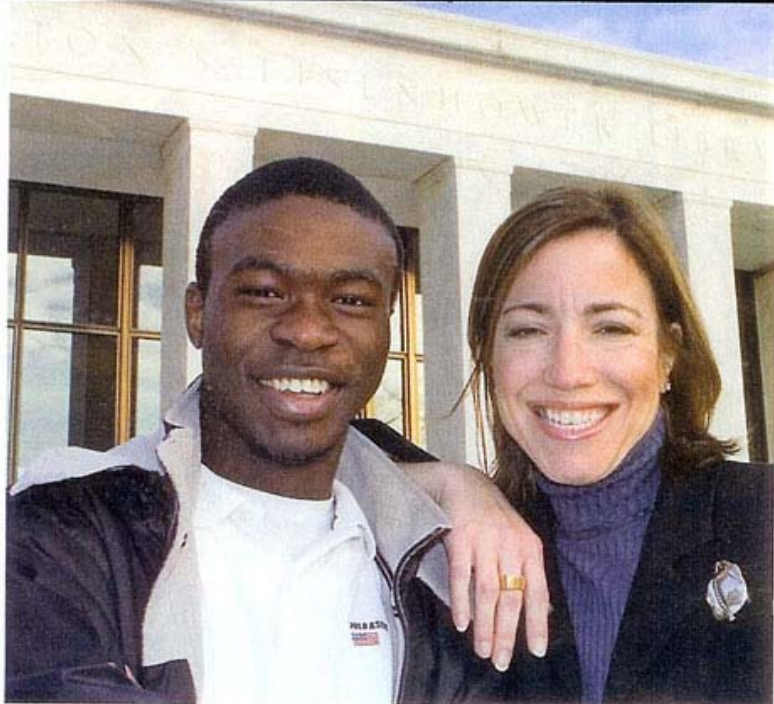
Baltimore

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APRIL 2005

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Ugheghe and Plant: Hundreds of college success stories and still counting.

Steps to success

BY JULIE DIETRICK

In 1994, Theophilus Ugheghe, then age 11, came from Nigeria to Baltimore, settling in Northwest Baltimore with his mother, father, and two younger sisters. He recalls struggling through Winston Middle School—he didn't fit in and he didn't have any plans for the future.

"It was hard for people to accept me," Theophilus says. "I had no idea where I was going or what I was doing."

Ten years later, sitting in a coffee shop across the street from the Johns Hopkins University campus where Theophilus is a pre-med student, it's hard to tell there was ever a problem.

That's a credit to a nonprofit called Building STEPS, which helped Ugheghe make the leap from a rough introduction to inner-city American culture to attending one of the most prestigious schools in the country. Founded five years ago by Mathew Weinberg, CEO of The Weinberg Group, a Washington D.C.-based science consulting firm, Building STEPS—which has since relocated

here—gives promising high school students from lower socio-economic backgrounds the opportunity to learn more about the science and technology fields.

Students in Building STEPS are selected from three Baltimore City high schools—Dunbar, Southern, and Woodlawn—and placed into a two-year program giving them special seminars, field trips, and summer internships with some of the city's medical and science organizations. To be eligible to apply, students are required to have a 3.0 grade-point average, a consistent school-attendance record, and participate in a variety of extracurricular activities.

In its first year, 40 students—including Theophilus—vied for 20 slots in the Building STEPS program. Now in its fifth year, the program usually has more than 100 applicants for the program, which begins in the students' junior year of high school.

When Theophilus entered his second year in the program, his guidance counselors encouraged him to apply for college. This is when Building STEPS really came into play.

"I didn't know much about the college process and really, without Building STEPS, I probably wouldn't have gone," he said.

The program helps students write essays and letters expanding on their experiences. It also helps students get letters of recommendations from the business and educational partners who are involved in the program, including the University of Maryland.

"We get the opportunity to introduce these people to healthcare and really get them excited about careers in different fields in healthcare," said Jo-Ann Williams, the manager of career development at the University of Maryland Medical Center. Williams has been involved with Building STEPS for the past two years, during which she has seen "tremendous success" with the students enrolled in the program.

UMMC is also among the partners offering site visits for the high school students and summer internships, where students work for \$8 an hour. Other organizations, such as KCI Technologies and the Red Cross of Central Maryland, give students site tours and bring in guest lecturers to teach Building STEPS students about the job field.

The success rate has been impressive: 90 percent of Building STEPS students go on to college, with more than half of them receiving academic scholarships.

The group has raised more than \$400,000 in the past four years from major regional businesses, institutions, and foundations, including Comcast, credit-card giant MBNA, and Johns Hopkins University.

"The organization operates on a lean budget, but will require a marked increase in cash in order to expand into additional schools and accept more students," says Debra Hettleman Plant, Building STEPS Executive Director.

Theophilus, for one, is sold on the program—he says he'll encourage his two younger sisters to apply when they get to high school.

"I'm pretty shocked at how I turned out," he says with a big grin. "It's all been really incredible. I went from being unsure of where I was headed to all this. Yeah, I'd call it a success."