

A steppingstone for low-income students

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Original Baltimore Sun article: [A steppingstone for low-income students](#)
Alicia Lee plans to do something no one in her immediate family has done.

The 17-year-old senior at Woodlawn High School will attend the Johns Hopkins University beginning this fall, and if all goes well, she'll become the first person in her family to earn a bachelor's degree.

Lee and many other county students got help with the college application process from Building STEPS Science Technology Education Partnerships, a nonprofit program that helps high-achieving high school students from low socioeconomic backgrounds by guiding them through the application process and providing activities that expose students to college, science, math and technology.

The program, which has been successful at Dunbar and Digital Harbor high schools in Baltimore City and Woodlawn High in Baltimore County, will be expanded to two other county schools, officials announced this week.

The program has started recruiting sophomores at Randallstown and Milford Mill Academy high schools.

'The more people that are interested in science, the better off the world is,' said program founder Matthew Weinberg.

Weinberg, CEO of Weinberg Group, a science and consulting firm, started the program in Washington in 1995 and moved it to the Baltimore area in 2000. He said he and his wife devote about \$100,000 to Building STEPS every year and rely on grants from other companies to help with funding. The program mainly aims to help students interested in science, math and technology, and assists up to 40 students per class year.

Weinberg said he's proud to be called a geek by his children.

'Geeks are in,' said Baltimore County Executive James T. Smith Jr., who told Milford Mill students the Base Realignment and Closure program will bring thousands of math, science and technology jobs to nearby Fort Meade and Aberdeen Proving Ground.

Students apply for the program in sophomore year, and are selected based on grades, coursework and extracurricular activities. Executive Director Debra Hettleman Plant said the cost per student is about \$3,000 for the whole program.

A \$30,000 donation from Walman Optical, an employee-owned company with an office in Baltimore, made the program's expansion to Randallstown and Milford Mill possible.

In addition to helping students through the college admissions and scholarship applications processes in their senior years, Building STEPS takes participants on field trips to expose them to college, math, science and technology worlds in their junior years. Destinations include Towson University, the University of Maryland Medical System and the Northrop Grumman Corp. The program also helps students find summer internships after their junior years.

Lee, who said she might major in marine biology at the Johns Hopkins University, interned at the University of Maryland Biotechnology Institute Center of Marine Biotechnology in Baltimore.

'I knew I wanted to go to college, but I didn't know how I was going to get there,' she said.

Another beneficiary of the program, 17-year-old Woodlawn senior Mya Jones, said the program helped her secure a full scholarship to Georgetown University.

'Building STEPS gives you that extra push to get going toward your goals,' she said.

Plant, who designed the two-year program and oversees the organization, said her reward comes in seeing the students she helps succeed. She said 85 percent of the program's graduates earn bachelor's degrees.

'I got an e-mail yesterday saying Mya got into Georgetown with a full scholarship,' she said. 'When you've been with someone for two years, you think, 'Her life is about to change like nobody's business.' How great is that?' ,hr> Building steps at a glance • Founded in 1995, moved to Baltimore in 2000 • Assists 40 students per year • Foundation offers about \$3,000 in services per student • Student requirements: 3.0 or higher GPA, 90 percent attendance, interest in science, technology or mathematics • Participating schools: Dunbar and Digital Harbor high schools in Baltimore City; Milford Mill Academy, Randallstown and Woodlawn high schools in Baltimore County andrew.schaefer@baltsun.com

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