

Owings Mills resident encourages 'her kids'

Building Steps points students toward college

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by Lisa Rosato

Owings Mills resident Debra Hettleman Plant likes to keep track of "her kids" — all 80 of them.

And she's ready to take on more.

Take, for example, Sheena Williams, a graduate of Baltimore's Dunbar High School and the first in her family to go to college.

Williams, one of Plant's "kids," never anticipated a career in medicine but is pursuing one now.

Plant is executive director of the nonprofit Building Steps. The organization exposes top-performing Maryland high school students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to science- and technology-based fields, where minorities are largely under-represented.

"Building Steps helped me explore different fields in the sciences," Williams said. "I'm now a bio major at Notre Dame and plan to attend nursing school."

For Kelly Smith, a graduate of Southern High School and also the first in her family to go to college, higher education was never on her radar.

"I thought only lawyers made money," Smith said.

Now, the University of Maryland- College Park student is studying business. A Baltimore Incentive Award winner, she received a full scholarship, and her benefactors have even committed to paying for her to attend graduate school.

"Building Steps showed me my full potential and helped me achieve my educational goals," she said.

Plant said the magic of Building Steps is seeing students from

underprivileged backgrounds succeed and follow goals they never knew they could have.

"It shows them opportunity and possibility that no one at home did," Plant said.

Building Steps was formed in 1999 by Matthew Weinberg, chief executive officer of The Weinberg Group, a scientific consulting firm with offices in Washington, California and Belgium.

Weinberg tried to hire minorities for his firm, but it was difficult finding candidates qualified in science and technology.

"They didn't have the same leg up," he said. "I thought if I could correct these inequities, it would be a good thing."

With that thought, Building Steps was born.

In the past four years, Plant has worked to fine-tune the program.

Through educational partnerships and financial aid from The Weinberg Group, Building Steps has helped about 20 students a year from three schools: Woodlawn High in Baltimore County and Dunbar and Southern high schools in Baltimore.

Now comfortable with participants' successes, Plant said it's time to grow.

"We now know that the model works," she said. "Every piece is really strong. Now, ideally, we pick three more schools."

But to add more schools, more staff is needed and, of course, more money.

Plant said the first step will be to kick off a fund-raising campaign. The drive will seek out corporate and individual sponsors and donors, who Plant said will get more than a return on their investment.

"They need to start bringing young, bright minorities in their doors," she said. "This is a way to do that."

Through Building Steps, students are becoming professionals with advanced degrees, Plant said.

To qualify for the program, applicants must be a sophomore at one of the three high schools and maintain a 3.0 grade-point average on a scale of 4.0. They also must be involved in extracurricular activities, have a good attendance record and provide letters of recommendation.

Once students are accepted into the program, they attend seminars offered by the organization's educational partners, such

as Erickson Retirement Communities, the University of Maryland Medical System and Johns Hopkins Hospital.

Participants learn about job interviews, human resources, money management, and SAT and college preparation. They take part in paid, summer internship programs sponsored by the educational partners.

"It gives them exposure," Plant said. Soon, students start to think: 'Oh, look what's possible.'"

The connection between the participants and Building Steps does not end with their acceptance into college.

"Our kids need to stay connected" to us, Plant said. "We try to instill in them that Building Steps is their support system. Once you're in, you're in."

For more information on Building Steps, visit www.buildingsteps.org or call 410-308-4800.

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