

Posted on Sun, Aug. 12, 2007

Graduation day for Steppingstone Scholars.

New beginning for pupils from rough backgrounds

By Suzette Parmley
Inquirer Staff Writer

For the students who go through the Steppingstone Scholars Inc. program, getting a better education often means escaping violent and drug-prone neighborhoods.

Sometimes the violence is a world away but still close to home.

Samyra Pacha of the city's Olney section has several family members who live in Kabul, Afghanistan. She said some had been injured in bombings there, which has influenced Samyra to enter the medical profession.

"I'd like to be a knee-replacement surgeon," said the soft-spoken 10-year-old, who was among the 42 students who graduated from the academic program housed at Episcopal Academy in Merion yesterday. "It would be a way for me to help people because so many have lost their feet and legs in the bombings."

It's not the type of insight expected from someone so young, but those selected for the prestigious 420-day program, which spans 14 months and two summers and trains selected fourth and fifth graders to get accepted into the city's top college-preparatory schools, are above average in intelligence and talent.

Their maturity speaks of the circumstances that they encounter daily, said Steppingstone president Nina Weisbord. She said four of the 42 graduates had had direct violence in their families.

"These kids have to overcome so much to get to where they're at," she said. "They have to block out so much more than my children."



ELIZABETH ROBERTSON / Inquirer Staff
Photographer

Above, Brianna Belo (center), 11, hugs her diploma and her friend Cijakaa Lindsay, 11. At right, Shabri Worthey, 11, accepts her diploma from the academic preparatory program.

Program director Eddie Mensah said his heart races whenever he sees a shooting on the local evening news.

"The first thought on my mind is whether our kids are all right," Mensah said, "because all of our kids live in those neighborhoods.

"These kids come from that, they live with that, and yet they're willing and strong enough to rise above it," he said.

Yesterday's keynote speaker, author Veronica Chambers, gave a moving and emotional speech to the graduates on resiliency.

Chambers, who lives in Philadelphia, said she escaped a stepmother who beat her and a neighborhood where drug dealers roamed regularly. She entered college at 16. That same year, her brother went to prison.

"I just knew I had to get to college because education meant freedom," said Chambers, as she paused to wipe away tears. "There were drugs in my neighborhood, and people getting shot. If I could get an education, I could do something else."



ELIZABETH ROBERTSON /
Inquirer Staff Photographer

Shabri Worthey receives her
graduation certificate from the
Steppingstone program.

In his speech yesterday, Philip Gregory said, "My classmates can become anything they want to become," after the 42 graduates paraded into the school chapel dressed in their Sunday finest. The girls all wore white flowing gowns, and the boys were in suits.

Although only 10, Philip said he knows he wants to be a lawyer so he can help mediate race relations. His goal was reaffirmed about a week ago, when, he said, he and his mother walked into a furniture store in the Northeast. He said the owner told him: "Sit down, don't move. I have surveillance cameras."

"People just judge you by your color," said Philip, who starts at the Haverford School on the Main Line next month. "It's wrong."

The Steppingstone Scholars Inc. is a privately funded, nonprofit organization entering its eighth year. It costs about \$900,000 a year to operate. Weisbord said the money comes from corporate and foundation grants and private gifts.

The program also serves an additional 264 pupils in academic enrichment and college prep programs.

Applicants must go through an intense selection process, where they are nominated by their school, a minister, a church, a boys' club, or a school counselor to be a Steppingstone Scholar. Then each goes through a series of aptitude tests and interviews.

Weisbord said there were 500 nominations this year. The program staff winnowed those down and interviewed 90 applicants. They selected 36 for the upcoming class.

After the 14-month program, the children can enter a charter, independent or parochial school, or stay in their current school.

"Our mission is to get these kids to college," Weisbord said. "This is the first benchmark."

The program has given the parents something as well.

"It's changed me," said Tracy Branker, father of 10-year-old Quaran Branker, who is entering his second year in the program, when the students begin applying to the city's magnet schools. "My wife and I have a better relationship because we're so much more involved now in things like his homework."

Branker said the Steppingstone Scholars program, karate, and a youth basketball program were among the activities that occupy his son's time.

"We keep him out of the neighborhood," he said.

Contact staff writer Suzette Parmley at 215-854-2594 or sparmley@phillynews.com.