

THE CALL

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Woonsocket High School ninth-grader Mohammed Seck is seen here with adviser Ralph Toribio.



Central Falls' Calcutt Middle School eighth-grader Qiana Carter is seen here with adviser Huascar Beato.



Woonsocket Middle School eighth-grader Alicia Mello is seen here with her adviser, Ranika Spiver.

VALLEY'S ALL-STARS

Local kids get College Crusade designation

By JON BAKER

WOONSOCKET — Alicia Mello well remembers, as a fifth-grader at Citizens Memorial Elementary School, receiving the prestigious Mary Ann Jolicoeur Award for being the most outstanding student in her class.

"What made it so special was that my classmates and teachers nominated me," reminisced Mello, now an eighth-grader, while sitting in an empty Woonsocket Middle School classroom long after the final bell had rung. "I went up on the stage and saw the plaque with my name engraved on it. I felt so proud. I remember looking at my dad, and he had tears in his eyes."

When Mello, 13, discovered in November she had been selected one of only seven mid-

dle and high school students statewide to earn College Crusade of Rhode Island "All-Star" status, she admitted to having similar feelings.

"I couldn't believe it when I heard the news," Mello gushed. "I was so happy. When I got home and my parents saw my smile, they said, 'OK, Alicia, something good happened at school today, didn't it?' I told them, and they said, 'You know, nothing you do ever stops surprising us.' They were thrilled."

Fact is, two other localites gained the same honor, and reactions rivaled those of Mello. They include Mohammed Seck, 14, a Woonsocket High freshman, and Qiana Carter, 13 and an eighth-grader at Calcutt Middle School in Central Falls.

See ALL-STARS, Page A-2

All-stars

Continued from Page A-1

Karen Donovan, the College Crusade's marketing and communications officer, stated this is the inaugural year of the "All-Star" program, and these students received such a lofty laurel for excellence in three categories, among them: Academics, school attendance and premier participation in College Crusade programs.

"We have all sorts of assemblies and programs running after school, on the weekends and during school vacations," she noted. "We have enrichment programs for social and personal development — that is, how kids can make plans for their own lives and how to be a leader; career awareness; and also a college preparatory program. We'll actually bring children, starting in the sixth grade, to college campuses so they can see what that experience is like."

The College Crusade, formerly the Rhode Island Children's Crusade, is an innovative, non-profit organization, founded in 1989, to reduce school dropout rates and increase educational and career success for youths from low-income urban communities. Such officials, with help from hired advisors at these

schools, reach out to students as they enter middle school and provide support and guidance through high school graduation.

"We also offer college scholarships for financially-eligible graduates," Donovan explained. "Students who are members of the Crusade graduate and go right on to college at much higher rates than peers in the state's urban school districts. Each year, we serve approximately 3,800 Crusaders from Rhode Island's most disadvantaged communities — Providence, Pawtucket, Central Falls and Woonsocket."

"The overwhelming majority are from low-income or minority families," she added. "Our services combine the steady, nurturing presence of caring adults with a rich array of programs that focus on academic enrichment, social and personal development, career exploration and preparation for post-secondary education."

Donovan also claimed that about 800 former Crusade participants currently are pursuing higher education with scholarship aid, and that 209 sixth-graders from Pawtucket, Providence, Central Falls and Providence registered this fall.

"This is the first time we've granted All-Star awards, and it's a recognition thing," Donovan offered. "We had hundreds of kids win in one or two of the categories, but we

only had seven accomplish all three, and that's pretty special. This isn't only about academics, but about a well-rounded approach to learning in all facets of their lives."

"The qualifications included a grade-point average of 85 or higher for all four quarters; perfect attendance in school; and excellence in taking part in Crusade programs," she continued. "We keep very detailed records on all of our students, and we looked at those for the (2007-08) academic year, and chose the top 20 in each grade — there were seven, sixth through 12th. Then we narrowed it down. This is an indication that these kids are on a successful path to academic and social achievement."

Mello, Seck and Carter all admitted becoming involved with Crusade programs when they were in the third grade.

"I remember being in a nature trail program when I was at Citizens Memorial School, and we cleaned it up, and actually saw deer tracks," she said. "I always have loved nature, and that's why I stayed with it. Later on, I went on different field trips to colleges, and I also had an advisor in sixth grade (Steven Herrera) that I could talk to about anything, like if I was having trouble at school or whatever."

Mello, who in her classes receives grades of 95 or better, already knows she someday wants to be an artist or an art

instructor, or perhaps a first-grade teacher. She wants desperately to attend the Rhode Island School of Design.

"I like to be creative, and I love art," said Mello, who also takes part in her school's chorus. "I enjoy drawing nature scenes — trees, flowers, grass, clouds, the sun. It makes me happy, and it relaxes me. If I'm stressed out, I'll sit down and draw or paint. Then again, if I have a good book, I won't put it down."

As for Seck, who revels in his history, reading, algebra and reading classes at WHS, he would like to chase a dream of becoming a graphic designer, perhaps in the field of video games.

"I've known that since the end of seventh grade," Seck smiled. "Last year, I looked at Emerson College, because I saw that it had a pretty good school in that field. Then, again, this past summer, I went to a transition program from middle to high school, and someone told me I should go to Full Sail University in Florida because it was so good in graphic design."

"When I found out I was a Crusade All-Star, it felt good; it was a pretty big deal," he added. "It's definitely an honor, but I also know I've got my academics to worry about."

His advisor, Ralph Toribio, claimed Seck is "very humble, very involved and always looking to take the extra step to suc-

ceed," and the Crusade offerings have helped him.

"Every morning, he'll step outside the school to ask me if there's anything going on in terms of new programs," Toribio said. "I love his enthusiasm. He's a very bright kid. I haven't known him very long, but he's very into this program."

For that matter, so is Carter, who collects A's and B's in her courses at Calcutt.

"When I was in third grade, I heard about the College Crusade, and I thought it would help me get ready for college," she said. "It involved a lot of programs I wanted to do, like plays, after-school things and — later on — a Career Day, where we met different professionals who described their jobs."

"I've already been to Johnson & Wales University, URI, Brown and Bryant universities, and that was really interesting, but everything was so big," she added. "There were so many people, and the classrooms were huge. I'm not sure where I want to go to college yet, but I'm thinking I want to be a doctor, because I want help people. I'd like to keep them healthy. Then again, maybe I'll be a lawyer."

"With these (Crusade) programs, I've learned a lot. They've helped me understand a lot about different careers, and what I may want to do someday."