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EDUCATION

With Reed's help, College Crusade aids the disadvantaged

The senator says the nonprofit group gives students the tools to stay in school and graduate

By NEIL DOWNING
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

PROVIDENCE -- Working the room like a revival preacher, Chanravy Proeung tells her 29 young students to sit in a circle and write their first names on the flashcard in front of them.

"And then I want you guys to write a fact about yourselves on the other side," she said. "Come on, beautiful people, let's go!"

The students respond with commotion, but they get the task done. Later, they will be asked to recite what they have written, and to remember what they have heard from other students in the classroom. The point is to get them working with flashcards, using them as a tool for studying and as a memory aid, Proeung explains afterward.

Proeung is an instructor for the College Crusade of Rhode Island, a nonprofit group based in Providence. The group helps middle school and high school students from low-income, urban school districts stay in school, study and prepare for college, said Todd Flaherty, the group's president and chief executive officer.

And on Saturday, at the Johnson & Wales University campus on Providence's waterfront, the group not only offered programs for its students in space donated by the university, but also celebrated its 20th anniversary.

As part of the event, the group honored Sen. Jack Reed for his support and his efforts to steer federal money its way, for "being able to bring these funds home to Rhode Island," Flaherty said.

The group was founded in 1989 by Americo W. Petrocelli, former state commissioner of higher education, and was originally known as the Children's Crusade for Higher Education, Flaherty said.

It gets about three-quarters of its money through a federal grant from the U.S. Department of Education's "GEAR UP" program; the rest comes from private donations and state funds, Flaherty said.

Accepting an award from the group Saturday, Reed praised the organization for its work in helping students with their study skills and encouraging them to complete high school and shoot for college. "Our confidence in the future rests in our confidence in you," Reed told the students.

In an interview afterward, Reed said that the College Crusade's work is "actually about



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / KATHY BORCHERS

Chanravy Proeung, an instructor for the College Crusade of Rhode Island, draws applause from Sen. Jack Reed, center, and others Saturday at the Johnson & Wales amphitheatre in Providence.

developing [students'] talents" and giving them the tools they need to stay in school, study and graduate.

The group also provides financial assistance to many of its participating students. Since 2001, it has awarded \$22 million in scholarships to students in Rhode Island who go on to college, Flaherty said.

Long before Proeung became an instructor for the

group, she was taking part in its programs as a student.

Her parents, who came here from Cambodia in the 1970s, "knew nothing about college. They knew nothing about how to get into college," she said.

The group's support and guidance, and efforts by its instructors and mentors — as well as some urging from her mother — helped encourage her, she said.

censing exam. "I did it. You guys can do it, too," she told about 100 students in an assembly Saturday.

The group provides 28 different programs for about 3,700 students from Central Falls, Providence, Pawtucket and Woonsocket, Flaherty said.

Among other things, the group offers preparatory classes for the SAT standardized college admissions tests, and helps students prepare college application essays and applications for financial aid.

It also offers study aids to students, and helps introduce them to career opportunities.

Students who are members of the College Crusade of Rhode Island graduate from high school and go to college at much greater rates than their peers in the state's urban school districts, according to the group's figures.

One such student is Selena Suarez, 11, of Woonsocket at Woonsocket Middle School. "I think it's pretty fun," she said of the group's program. "The teachers are very nice — and the advisers," she said in an interview during lunch at the group's Johnson & Wales site on Saturday. As for her career plans, she said she wants to become a marine biologist and veterinarian.

Raised in the city's Smith Hill neighborhood, she went to Classical High School, and graduated earlier this year from Rhode Island College with a bachelor's degree in nursing — the first person in her family to graduate from college, she said.

Proeung, 23, now serves as an instructor for the group, works part-time at a restaurant, raises her 6-year-old child, and is studying to take the nurse li-