

STUDENTS ON A CRUSADE FOR COLLEGE

During vacation week, students enjoy taking part in the College Crusade of Rhode Island program that brings them to several campuses.

BY GINA MACRIS
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Irving Robinson, a high school junior from Providence, sat in the cafeteria of Salve Regina University, in Newport, 35 miles from home — and a world away from his urban childhood.

He had signed up for the campus visit through the College Crusade of Rhode Island, a non-profit organization that promotes college preparedness with many activities.

The College Crusade "is a

great thing. It's kept me out of a lot of trouble," said Irving, who attends Classical High School.

"I could have done a lot of weird stuff with my vacation," he said with an impish smile.

The College Crusade, founded in 1989 as the Children's Crusade, works on the idea that the presence of a caring adult makes a big difference in a youngster's life.

With a \$4.3-million annual budget, about three-quarters of it covered by federal funds, the College Crusade provides year-round programs aimed at college preparedness, academic enrichment, leadership development and career awareness.

Lawrence Reed, a 16 year-old

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Reuben Tillman, right, and his son Taliq, 9, get in line at the Clark University cafeteria in Worcester, where Tillman, a College Crusade adviser, guided students on a tour.

Crusade

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sophomore at Hope High School, Providence, has been on several college tours with the College Crusade.

"Every college tour gives me a lot to think about," the soft-spoken student said on Thursday after a bus dropped him off in South Providence from a trip to Clark University, in Worcester.

Clark has opportunities to study abroad and the promise of a fifth year of tuition-free study for students with high grade-point averages during the first four years, said Lawrence and his lifelong friend and fellow Crusader, Mani Lyles, 17, a sophomore at Toll Gate High School, in Warwick.

The two joined the Crusade in the third grade. They say one of the reasons they stay in the Crusade is the help they get with preparing for college — a process educators say begins in middle school. The Crusade now accepts students beginning in the sixth grade.

The College Crusade provides a free SAT preparation course. But that is just one facet of a far-reaching menu that includes Saturday activities for middle and high schoolers during the school year and enrichment classes during the summer — all free.

On the schedule Friday, for example, is a workshop for high school juniors interested in writing better essays on their college applications.

And on Saturday, the Crusade will wind up school vacation week with a career day at Bryant University, in Smithfield.

The most recent statistics for College Crusade students indicates they outperform the average for students not involved in the program in Rhode Island. Out of every 100 Crusaders who enter ninth grade, 79 graduate from high school on time. The comparable figures among nonparticipants are 54 out of 100 in urban districts and 71 out of 100 statewide, according to the organization.

And in that same group of 100 students, 48 Crusaders attend college immediately after graduating from high school, compared with 31 students in urban districts and 40 students statewide.

The Crusade serves about 3,800 students statewide, with a primary focus in Providence, Pawtucket, Central Falls and Woonsocket. During the current school vacation week, advisers

have accompanied their charges on a series of college tours in Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut.

The Crusade employs 22 full-time advisers who play a critical role in implementing the philosophy of the organization.

At Hope High, Lawrence Reed's adviser is Kalomo Vanterpool, whose name brought a smile to his face. Reed described Vanterpool as "an awesome guy. He teaches people to respect each other and to respect themselves."

Vanterpool and Reuben Tillman were among several advisers who followed their charges to college campuses during the school vacation week.

In Newport, over lunch after a tour of Salve Regina University on Wednesday, Tillman explained his relationship with the students. "They know if they step to the side, I will mention it," said Tillman.

Lizely Escobar, a junior at the Providence Academy of International Studies (PAIS), said in the same conversation that Tillman is "like a dad who can't punish us at home."

Tillman continued: "Teachers do what they have to do, and guidance counselors do what they have to do," but "we [advisers] kind of freelance."

On Thursday night, he planned to make reminder calls to high school juniors who have signed up for the Friday morning workshop on essay writing.

Tillman works one-on-one with students and hires after-school tutors on behalf of the Crusade for his charges. He also gets to know youngsters through Cru Club, a series of Saturday activities at the Harborside campus of Johnson & Wales University.

During the week, Tillman divides his time among PAIS, the adjacent William B. Cooley High School for Health, Science and Technology, and Times², a charter school.

Tillman, 30, a graduate of East Providence High School and the University of Rhode Island, said, "I wish I had me when I was their age."

In Newport, Tillman encouraged the students to keep an open mind about applying to Salve. Students should apply to a wide variety of schools to keep their options open, he said.

"When you hear the SAT scores, when you learn about the academic requirements," Tillman said, "don't think you can't do this."

"Think of them as motivation" to work harder, he said.

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