

# SUNDAY EXTRA

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# Worthy crusade: Mentoring to help urban youths succeed

Sitting in a conference room at the Providence Academy of International Studies (PAIS), four high school seniors spoke gratefully of the help and opportunities

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of the help and opportunities they got from the College Crusade. The Crusade's mission is to prevent low-income, urban students from failing in their education. The kids who sign up and stick with the program get a mentor, academic support and scholarship money to attend college or post-secondary training.

The Crusade changes lives. Small, quiet Claudia Bonilla thought for a moment when I ask what the Crusade did for her. Then she said firmly, "A lot. They helped a lot. Like, last summer, they helped me go on a student-exchange program in Argentina for six weeks. I never would have thought I would have that kind of opportunity. I thought I had to be rich. But the Crusade helped me get out of my comfort zone. I had kind of a closed mind. This is Rhode Island; this is my life;

that's it. Then, since being in Argentina, there's more to Rhode Island for me, and there's certainly more to life in general."

Yessenia Nunez also went to Argentina. Among other opportunities, the Crusade has money for four Crusaders to live with a host family in another country, through the Experiment in International Living. Nunez was in a group that worked with blind children. "We took them to the zoo. It was really touching for me because you have to go back to basics when you want to say: 'Look at this, look at that,' but they can't see. I was working with other kids from all over the United States. We still keep in touch. Up until last summer I was doing mediocre academically. Now I want to be a lawyer. Maybe study international law."

Their adviser, Reuben Tillman, beams like a proud dad. Nattily dressed, funny and cool, Tillman loves his job. He mentors about 100 students, half from PAIS and half from Cooley Health and Science High School, which shares a building with PAIS. When I saw him in action, he was striding through the hallways, calling to kids to remind them

about some application or other, or urging them to show up for an activity. Nunez assures me that he'll help anyone, so Crusaders regularly bring their friends to him for help and advice.

Tillman is 1 of the Crusade's 23 advisers, who serve 4,000 students annually. The advisers find opportunities for the kids, and nudge them to apply, even when they don't feel like it. They make sure paperwork of all sorts is accurate and completed in time. The kids get SAT preparation classes, financial-aid workshops, college visits and more. Tillman runs a regular afterschool program for his Crusaders, where they talk over difficulties, learn new skills, and focus on getting into college.

He says, "Our philosophy is that if a kid has a concerned, caring adult, he will succeed."

That idea is echoed all over the Crusade literature. Over its 18 years, the College Crusade (formerly the Children's Crusade) has settled on a formula for success: Get to the kids early, recruit in fifth grade. Have the sixth graders sign a pledge and spend three days in an orientation course called "Ways to 'A's.'" If they can persist through that, get

their parents involved as much as possible. Give them cool programs that stretch their minds. Stick with them for the full seven years until graduation.

Tillman says, "The one thing I don't tolerate is 'Mister, I'm going to take a year off.' Oh, no, I've seen that before. One year turns into 10. We want the kids to leave here with good options."

And they do. Among the last two years' graduates, 202 went to the University of Rhode Island, 7 to Boston University, 5 to Brown and 1 to Harvard.

Last year, the Crusade awarded roughly \$2 million in scholarships to 580 students.

Seventy percent of the Crusaders who graduated on time continued their education. Nationally, only 52 percent of low-income students do so. In Rhode Island, only 55.6 percent of the students from all income levels go directly to college, according to the Crusade literature. Eighty-one percent of the Crusaders graduated on time. Yes, they do lose some battles.

They almost lost Wanda Rivera and Cova Lee, the other two seniors in the conference room. Wanda was an honors student through sophomore year, but let

her school work go completely when she got wrapped up in a romance with a boy her junior year. Last summer, she woke up to the path her life was on, and found Tillman the first day of school, begging for help to get back on track. He was there for her. She gushes with gratitude.

Lee's family moved a great deal — to South Carolina and back again, to a series of schools there and here. But while she was in Rhode Island, she had a Crusade mentor. The Crusade helped her spend two weeks during each of two summers at Roger Williams University, doing SAT and college preparation, including etiquette and how to dress professionally. She'll be Cooley's valedictorian this spring.

Tillman says, "You find yourself being a social worker." Half the time, he's helping a kid fill out an application when boom, the kid stops and tells Reuben something really upsetting from life at home. He says, "A lot of these kids travel difficult roads just to get themselves to school. They need someone to care."

Mary Sylvia Harrison, president and CEO of the Crusade, says, "We're the advocate in the schools that the parents would be

if it weren't for circumstances, resources and their limited experience. They don't know what's broken at school."

If Tillman or any of the Crusade's advisers had been financed by the Providence School Department or another public agency, they would have been long gone by now, victims of budget cuts. Public bureaucracies rarely value relationships between kids and adults and don't like to spend tax dollars to support such relationships. Sports, arts, counseling, and programs that connect kids with adults — these "frills" are the first to get cut.

And we wonder why few students succeed.

For more information on the Crusade or to make a donation, see <http://www.thecollegecrusade.org>

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