

Putting Student Award Winners on the Fast Track

COMING OF AGE in the streets and shadows of the city, what Andrew Santiago has lived with — drugs, violence, death — is not so unusual. But thanks to his own drive and the support of the Kaplan Educational Foundation, the 21-year-old recently found an oasis, a single, rented room in Harlem — a place to study, sleep and pursue his goal of becoming a writer.

“It’s really quiet, it’s mine, and I sleep. It’s magic,” says the soon-to-be graduate of Borough of Manhattan Community College, finally savoring a few of the things most college students take for granted: a bed of his own, safety and a good night’s sleep.

Santiago and students like him are the diamonds in the rough. Bright, hard-working and likely the first in their family to go to college, they often have little support at home and only a vague understanding of what it takes to burnish their academic careers. CUNY officials know that beyond the University’s honors programs, there are other high achievers, attending senior and community colleges, who qualify to compete for prestigious scholarships. Now the University is moving forward with new efforts to find students like Santiago and prepare them to compete for national awards.

In November, 70 CUNY administrators from programs for high-achieving students convened to exchange ideas on how to find the brightest among CUNY’s many thousands across the University, match them with appropriate awards and mentor them through the rigorous application process.

“There is a range of very talented students at CUNY,” said James Airozo, University director of student academic awards and honors. “We’ve expanded our outreach efforts, and that will expand the applicant pool for scholarships.” CUNY, he added, is “trying to break the assumption” that only Honors College students are eligible, as public institutions are increasingly competing against private colleges and universities in grooming students for national honors.

The Kaplan Educational Foundation is one of a number of foundations, philanthropists and other donors who are investing heavily in high-achieving CUNY students such as Santiago, who has written a play and wants to develop his creative writing skills, and other extraordinary students seeking careers in the sciences and technology.

Along with William and Linda Macaulay, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the Rhodes Trust and others, Kaplan recognizes the potential of CUNY students as the University sharpens its own efforts to mentor high achievers such as its newest Rhodes Scholar, David L.V. Bauer, and promote them for top awards.

Airozo pointed to the case of Mark Smiley, who was admitted to CUNY through the SEEK program — which provides extra financial aid, tutoring and counseling to talented low-income students with shaky transcripts — but who won a scholarship from the Cooke foundation to pay for medical school.

Honors counselors do more than match students with awards. Carol Oliver, director of Hunter College’s Ronald E. McNair scholars program, told colleagues at the fall meeting that she has played the role of friend, mentor and even psychologist to students. She pushed a student for a month to apply to graduate school; the student felt discouraged by a low GRE score.

The student now attends Rutgers University on a full scholarship. “We have to nurture these students to help them create a balance between their academic and



Andrew Santiago, an aspiring writer and winner of a scholarship from the Kaplan Educational Foundation, has found direction in his life thanks to support and guidance from his BMCC advisers.

personal lives,” Oliver said.

Santiago, too, had to be nudged to apply for the Kaplan foundation’s Leadership Program. The three-year-old initiative selects small cohorts of high-potential, low-income, mostly community college students each year for intensive support, advising and leadership training — from financial assistance, to “dress for success,” to preparation for transfer to a bachelor’s degree program.

Kaplan supports 17 students, aged 18 to 33, who attend CUNY community colleges or have transferred from CUNY to four-year colleges, including Mount Holyoke, George Washington, Morehouse, Syracuse, American and NYU.

Based on his 3.65 GPA and credits, Santiago had been invited by BMCC to a Kaplan informational seminar last winter. But after the meeting, he says, “I ripped up the paperwork, thinking: ‘What are my chances, really?’” A BMCC scholarship adviser pressed him to apply, and Santiago was called for an interview.

He met with foundation Director Jennifer Benn and Kaplan academic advisor Nancy Sanchez, a CUNY alumna — Kingsborough Community College and Brooklyn College — who advises and nurtures the Kaplan Scholars closely, visiting colleges with them; recommending books to expand their cultural and social horizons, bolstering their knowledge, confidence and credentials with tutoring and counseling.

“It got emotional,” said Santiago of his interview. The financial assistance the foundation offered was key. “I’d be able to go to school,” said Santiago, who had worked at Brooklyn day camps and after-school programs for years to support himself, the jobs a stabilizing factor even when his home life became so painful that he dropped out of Franklin D. Roosevelt High School.

“This journey to being a student,” as Santiago describes it, has been fraught. “I make the really hard parts of my life bearable with comedy,” he begins, sitting in the Kaplan Educational Foundation’s sleek midtown offices, where the community college students spend Fridays meeting with advisers and each other.

Santiago has plenty of material. A beloved aunt who, at 45, was “into drugs, had HIV” and “didn’t wake up” on Halloween of 2005. A brother who has “always been into trouble,” who did time

and was shot twice, the second time with nine bullets that left him paralyzed and in a wheelchair. A drug-abusing uncle who crowded Santiago out of his room in his grandmother’s Brooklyn apartment, leaving him without dependable space for studying and sleeping. A mother who went to prison soon after his birth, and with whom he has a distant relationship. A father he never knew.

On the first anniversary of his aunt’s death, “surrounded by all this sadness and all this pain,” Santiago decided that “I have to start somewhere. I don’t want to be a nobody.”

He signed up for GED prep classes and in a few months had the credential that would bring him to BMCC. “I remembered when I came home with good grades, and nobody cared,” Santiago said. “I was going to go to school and do it for myself, out of the love I had for my aunt.”

At BMCC, “I did the reading, I did the work and I got good grades. It was awesome,” he said. When a professor praised his first paper as

“a great piece of writing” and “told me I could do this,” the encouragement was a spark. Since then, Santiago has embraced a variety of genres and has even had a short play produced off-off Broadway — an achievement that developed from a contact he made at the Kaplan Educational Foundation.

Benn describes the program, which supports its scholars for three years, as “about removing barriers ... whether they’re academic or personal,” enabling the students to develop academic and leadership skills in preparation for transfer to a bachelor’s degree program. The transfers have so far been to private colleges, but Benn says what’s important is that a school be the “best fit” for the student.

The program’s focus is on high-potential, low-income black and Hispanic students, and the financial help is substantial, says Benn, with up to \$3,000 per year available for a living stipend, transportation and other expenses for those in the associate’s programs; and up to \$30,000 a year, including tuition and transportation, for those who transfer to the bachelor’s programs.

The funds ensure that Kaplan Scholars

can focus on being “students first,” Benn said. “We don’t allow students to work more than 15 hours per week.”

“We’re all people who have come from these difficulties and obstacles, and we’re all trying to achieve greatness. We have so much to offer each other,” said Santiago of his fellow Kaplan Scholars.

They include BMCC student Nolvía Delgado, 19, of Ridgewood, Queens, who worked three jobs to help support her family before Kaplan’s support enabled her to scale back to one, as a legislative assistant for a Brooklyn assemblyman. Delgado’s interests are public service and international affairs. “I possibly might be running for mayor in the long run,” she says.

Norberto Taveras, 23, of Manhattan, is another scholar whose fierce drive inspires. In 2001, he fell out of a tree, suffering a catastrophic spinal cord injury. “I was totally paralyzed in the beginning,” he says, but after three surgeries and years of physical therapy, he uses a walker and has regained sensation in his lower limbs. A student at Hostos Community College, he advocates for physically challenged students and plans to become an occupational therapist.

The scholars are encouraged to learn from each other and from anyone else they meet in the foundation’s offices. Santiago met a woman working there who was in a playwriting workshop. He joined the workshop and wrote “Monkey,” about the tragic consequences when an ignored child turns to his toy monkey, his imagination, for attention because “no one else was there,” Santiago said. The play was staged in July at a theater on East 42nd Street.

Humor is the balm for a traumatic family history with which Santiago continues to grapple. “I’ve used comedy, jokes, my whole life to deal with everything else,” he said, adding that he would like to write for “Saturday Night Live” some day.

“It’s healing, it’s therapy, it’s fun,” he added “If I can use my story to make people laugh, feel connected and less alone, I’ll feel like I did my job as a writer.”

For now, the Kaplan Educational Foundation is helping him reach for a life beyond his past, to plans that include transferring next fall to a four-year college for his B.A.

“What’s important about this program,” he said, “is the support that they give me, that someone really cares about my education as much as I do. That’s what I’ve been dying for, pleading for from my family.”

His Kaplan advisers, he said, are “like family when you need them to be.”

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