Third group of ‘Dreamers’ set to graduate

53 students succeed in program that promotes higher ed

By TOM VOGT
Columbian staff writer

Their life-transforming opportunity came with cake. And when Marriah Smith and Mercedes Rindt were welcomed into the “I Have a Dream” program, the cake was what really impressed them.

Now Smith, Rindt and 51 classmates know a little more about the program.

“It’s an opportunity I never thought I’d have,” said Matt Walsh.

They’re all among this year’s graduating class of Vancouver Dreamers. The program’s members are receiving their diplomas this month at eight Clark County high schools, as well as in commencement ceremonies in several other states. All 53 grads are looking forward to more education: 10 plan on attending four-year colleges; 24 will attend Clark College; 10 will attend other community colleges; and nine are headed for vocational training.

They are among 70 students who were fourth-graders at Harney Elementary School in 1999. While not all of them are graduating this spring, all but two are on track for some form of certification. Seven will finish high school next year; six are working toward their GEDs; and two are joining the Job Corps, where they will receive GEDs.

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Washington is helping about 300 Vancouver students from low-income neighborhoods prepare for, get into and graduate from college.

But back in 1999, the prospect of college meant a lot more to their families than it did to the fourth-graders who'd been summoned to the Harney assembly.

"We didn't know what it meant," Rindt said a few days ago at a gathering of Dreamer seniors.

Marriah and I helped set it up, and all we were excited about was the cake," said Rindt, a Hudson's Bay senior who will attend Eastern Washington University.

But they figured something else was going on, Smith said.

"Our parents were crying," said Smith, a Bay senior who will attend Clark.

Since then, the students have benefited from tutoring and mentoring to keep them on track and involved.

They've been on outings and field trips where they've seen options they hadn't considered.

They've visited colleges and universities in Washington, bringing their higher-ed ambitions into focus.

And they've had some opportunities most people never get. Walsh was named his group's 2006 Dreamer of the Year, for his help as a volunteer at Dreamer events and projects. Along with the award winners from the other three classes, Walsh got to have lunch with community leaders.

"I got to meet the mayor," said Walsh, a Bay senior who will attend Clark. "I had to prepare a speech, and I talked about how I Have a Dream works."

And it's not what people might assume. It's a college-assistance program, but only a fraction of the sponsors' money goes to tuition. The program is designed to provide the last bit of tuition help after students have received all available scholarship funding and financial aid.

The people in the program — staff members and sponsors, mentors and tutors — are what get the students into position to get into college.

"They provide homework help," said Keny Leach, a Fort Vancouver senior who plans to attend Clark College and then transfer to Eastern Washington University.

And it's not always a matter of academics.

"A mentor can just be someone to talk to," said Colton Peterson, a Hudson's Bay senior who will attend Clark. "If your parents are divorcing, you can express how you feel."

Class members have developed a close relationship over the years, even though several have moved out of the area — including a former Harney classmate who now lives in Hillsboro, Ore.

"He still gets together with the Dreamers, and he still connects," said Jean Powell, a Fort Vancouver senior who will attend Clark.

"This ties us together, reminds us of where we came from," said Bay senior Max Welton, headed for Mount Hood Community College in Oregon.

It also links them with a group of younger students, the 91 members of the Class of 2011; they were second-graders at Martin Luther King Elementary School in 2001 when they became Vancouver's fourth and final Dreamer class.

Powell said that she has made some connections with the youngest class of Dreamers, who will be high school sophomores next year.

"I did my senior project on mentoring," Powell said.

"Three of us did," added Rindt.

Leach said that he found another setting at Fort Vancouver for helping a couple of members of the next Dreamer class.

"Two of the younger Dreamers were playing football this year," Leach said. "In my freshman year, I still didn't know what it was really about. I explained what it would do."

And that is?

"Make your future a lot brighter," Leach said. "Get a degree and make more money."

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