

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.

I Have a Dream of Southwest



Kenny Leach



Colton Peterson



Jean Powell



Mercedes Rindt



Marriah Smith



Matt Walsh



Max Welton

Update

Previously:

Seventy fourth-graders at Harney Elementary School were tapped for the "I Have a Dream" program in 1999.

What's new:

Fifty-three of those students are graduating from high school this month.

What's next:

Vancouver's fourth and final "Dreamer" class will graduate in 2011.

Dreamers:

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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 Kenny 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

To help:

■ Call I Have a Dream of Southwest Washington at 360-737-0720.

Letter from an inspiration

"I Have a Dream" began in 1981 in East Harlem, N.Y., where Eugene Lang promised the sixth-grade class at PS 121 that he'd help all 61 pay for college tuition if they stayed in school. In a school with a dropout rate of 75 percent, Lang's class saw 90 percent of the students graduate and 60 percent go to college. Lang sent an e-mail a few days ago to Mary Granger, president of I Have a Dream of Southwest Washington:

"My warmest, most profound congratulations to you and your colleagues, whose caring devotion represented the hand of God in adding critical values and significant opportunity to the lives of your Harney Dreamers,

I am very proud to acknowledge my respect, appreciation and affection for all you and your colleagues have accomplished in translating IHAD so meaningfully into the lives of so many children."

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 at-

tend 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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