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Noteworthy News

Rewarded for Resiliency

By Emily Wilson

May 17, 2007, 10:30

Rewarded for Resiliency

Recipients of the East Bay College Fund scholarships receive much more than money.

By Emily Wilson

Oakland, Calif.

From the time she was 10 years old, Katie Jay was in and out of homeless shelters with her mother, eventually attending a total of 32 different elementary and high schools.

But Jay overcame the chaos in her life and is now a senior studying criminology at San José State University, thanks in part to a scholarship from the East Bay College Fund.

"It's not like a typical scholarship where they just write you a check," she says of the program, which also provides students with a mentor. "It's more personal. We all come together on holidays and breaks. My mentor is available for me whenever I need to talk to her. That's a major thing — knowing somebody's there to assist you who really has a passion for it."

Jay praises the East Bay College Fund, but fund volunteers say it's Jay and other scholarship winners who should be held in high esteem. The fund is specifically aimed at students who show resiliency, and they say Jay certainly fits the bill.

The fund provides scholarships for Oakland, Calif.-area students who maintain a B or B+ high school GPA while dealing with severe financial and environmental challenges. Applications have come from single mothers who graduated at the top of their class, students who were born in refugee camps and those who have lost parents to violence or addiction.

The scholarship fund was started in 2002 when Andy Fremder, a former chief financial officer at a large investment firm, asked seven friends and colleagues for \$1,600 each to help send students to college. Today, each donor sponsors one student, contributing \$4,000 a year for four years to pay for tuition, books, housing or any school-related expense not covered by financial aid.

The donors immediately see the benefits of donating their money to support an actual person rather than an unseen cause, says Fremder.



Katie Jay, left, and Beatriz Torres are two of the 43 students who are benefitting from the East Bay College Fund.

“A lot of time when people give money they don’t see the results,” he says. “They assume it’s being used for good things, but with this you get instant gratification and long-term results.”

Since the first seven Great Expectations Scholarship awards were given out in 2003, the program has more than doubled. There are 43 students at schools such as San Francisco State, Smith College and Morehouse College. This year, the program will award another 17 scholarships at their annual dinner on May 23.

After this spring, the Fund will have given out about \$1 million in scholarships. There are about 150 donors — some give more than one scholarship and some form a group that pool their money to provide one scholarship. Jay’s mentor, Susan Keiter, a co-founder of the Fund, is one of the volunteers making the program possible.

“I’m a little in awe of her,” Keiter says of Jay. “I’ve never met anyone with more on-going challenges or anyone I was as sure was going to graduate.”

Beatriz Torres, who will graduate from the University of California, Santa Cruz this June with a degree in sociology, remembers how hard it was when she first showed up on campus.

“You come and you meet so many different people, and they come from so many different places and privileged schools,” she says. “Coming from Oakland, we didn’t even have the textbooks we needed sometimes.”

Now she appreciates her background, Torres says.

“I can go back to my community and see where I came from and what I accomplished,” she says. “I’d like to do some work in Oakland. That’s the place I found a lot of help and I would like to give back to my community in some way.”

This kind of commitment to doing good is why Lynn Bolton volunteers to read applications from potential scholars every year.

“Kids say things like, ‘I want to be a nurse and come back and work in the hospital down the street,’” Bolton says, adding that many applicants express a desire to be role models. “It tells the truth of the kids of East and West Oakland and counters the lies we always hear that they are all about drugs.”

Torres says she hopes to motivate her younger sisters to go beyond where she has — but they aren’t the only family members who have been influenced by her.

“My mom went back to school when I went to college,” Torres says. “Her English isn’t that great, and she’s getting her associate degree with four kids and a full-time job. She tells me, ‘I’m going to e-mail you this paper so you can help me’ and I say, ‘Mom, you can do it yourself. College isn’t that hard.’”

