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From the Hood to the U

To high school students who are statistical long-shots, the East Bay College Fund offers more than just a check.

By Emily Wilson

Published: May 16, 2007



In a warm spring day, a bunch of fresh-faced, smartly dressed young men and women wait nervously at the Alameda County Conference Center for college scholarship interviews. Appearances are important. These kids are among 48 Oakland and Emeryville high school seniors who already have made the first cut, down from 150. But only seventeen will walk away with assistance that could make many of them the first in their families to move beyond a high-school diploma.



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Burt Jones was tired of being surrounded by killing, so he applied himself in school.

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The East Bay College Fund offers more than each scholarship's cash value of \$16,000 over four years. The

winners also get a mentor to offer advice and encouragement to get them through to graduation. To qualify, students need to maintain a B average and demonstrate severe financial need, but they also have to show they can deal with adversity. That's something these kids know a lot about. Their essays tell of family members shot and killed, absent or drug-addicted parents, single motherhood, or lives as refugees.

Katie Jay, who studies sociology at San Jose State, was among the fund's first group of seven scholars in 2003. When Jay was ten, her mom's boyfriend threw mother and daughter out of the house, whereupon they

spent six years bouncing between dozens of homeless shelters. She finally went to live with an aunt in Oakland at age sixteen. "Going to all the different schools was the worst part," recalls Jay, who says she attended 32 schools before graduating from Castlemont High. "I had to keep starting over from the beginning."

Yet she somehow managed to keep up. "I saw how people around me were ending up and I just wanted to go a different route," says Jay, who dreams of being a doctor and opening a group home or a shelter for battered woman. Along with classes in criminology, English, and sociology, she works as a counselor at a group home and leads self-esteem workshops for Girl Scouts. Not surprisingly, the youngsters listen. "I never have any problems," she says, shrugging. "They can relate to me."

College hasn't been easy. Jay says she struggles with math, so pre-med has been a challenge. Her mother and father have come to live with her at college at various times — one time, both stayed with her. Their fighting, she says, drove her to sleep in her car and to stay with friends. But she's determined.

Susan Keiter, Jay's mentor and cofounder of the College Fund, is in awe of the 21-year-old. "I am stunned by the amount of stress and crises and family problems she has to deal with," she says. "She's also the person I'm most sure is going to graduate. She is so calmly focused, even when the

world is falling in around her. She blows me away on a regular basis."

Her mentor's support, Jay says, is among the things that makes this scholarship stand out. "I feel like I can call her anytime," she says. "That's a major thing, knowing somebody's there to assist you who really has a passion for it."

Fellow cofounder Andy Fremder, president of the college fund's board, provided the spark. He was involved with Meritus, a similar organization in San Francisco, and wanted to start one in the East Bay. In 2002 he asked seven friends and colleagues to donate \$16,000 each to help send a kid to college. About a third of the fund's money still comes from individuals, the rest from foundations. Keiter says the founders agreed upon the \$4,000 yearly figure as one that would round out the \$16,000 most of these students qualify for each year in financial aid.

Fremder, who was chief financial officer at a large investment firm for many years, says finding donors has been relatively easy. "People can really accomplish something," he says. "A lot of time when people give money they don't see the results, but with this you get instant gratification and long-term results. You can make a personal connection with the student and see the tangible benefits to them and their families."

The fund's retention rate so far has been impressive. Of the 46 students who have received the scholarships, 43 are still enrolled in colleges including UC Berkeley, San Francisco State, and Mills College. The nonprofit also boasts some 150 volunteers, including Lynn Bolton, who has read applications for the last few years. Bolton says she likes the way the group has brought in people from the community. "They say it takes a village to raise a child," she says. "Well, I want to be part of that village."

She finds the students' essays heartening: "I have seen the truth of who the children of impoverished communities are, and it counters the lie they are all about drugs. These young people care about their families and communities."

Burt Jones fits that description. The 2005 College Fund scholar is now a sophomore at California State Sacramento. He grew up in West Oakland's Acorn Housing complex, which was known for drugs and violence. Jones is determined that his life will be different, but says he won't forget where he comes from. Walking around the green, tree-covered campus, he carries his books in an orange backpack inscribed in black pen with "R.I.P." and the names of dead friends and relations: B-Bo, Freaky, Greedy, Tank. Thirteen names in all. "Yeah, this one was my cousin," Jones says, pointing to a name. "This is a friend. And another friend. There are more; these are just the people in my neighborhood. One of my friends just got killed the other day. He was shot in the head."

Jones says he decided early on that learning was the answer, and so he wrung everything he could out of school. At McClymonds High, he took AP classes, played football, planted trees, acted as president of the leadership class, did peer counseling, and organized pep rallies. He says he participated in so many activities because he wanted to be a role model. "I wanted my face to be well known," he says. "A lot of students feel like if they don't know you, they won't listen to you."

The young man considered being a psychologist, but when he got to college he decided he wants to become a lawyer, and, with luck, an Oakland judge someday. "A lot of DAs don't know what's going on in my community," he says. "They just give people the maximum sentence and don't give anyone a chance. I know I could make a difference and be just."

Oakland real-estate agent Randolph Belle, Jones' mentor, says what Jones has accomplished coming from McClymonds is truly remarkable — just getting through high school was an accomplishment. "Most kids don't," he says. "Burt is a young man who has been through a lot and

doesn't use it as a crutch. He doesn't ask for anything."

Back at the conference center, volunteer La'Cole Martin is sitting on an interview panel. She graduated from McClymonds in 2000 and moved on to UC Berkeley, so she has a pretty good idea of what these kids go through. She likes that the money comes with a mentor. "I received eleven scholarships, and only one was renewable [after one year]," she says. "I didn't have a continuing relationship with these people — they just kind of gave me all this money and sent me on my way. I think with the East Bay College Fund they maintain those relationships."

It's the emphasis on life experience and diversity that makes the fund unique, she adds: "A lot of scholarships just want to know who has the best grades and the best SAT scores, but *they* really want to know what people have had to deal with."