

My ProjectSuccess

By Donnie Belcher

To all graduating seniors, I know exactly what you're going through. You're scared. You're excited. You began this year asking yourself questions like, "What is next for me?" "Am I going to college?" "Where am I going to college?" "Will my dream college accept me?" Slowly, but surely those questions then evolved to, "What am I going to major in?" "What am I going to do with the rest of my life," and more importantly "Who is going to pay for all of this?"

When I was a student at Minneapolis North High school, I endured all those agonies, and more. In addition to the normal stress that high school students experience, I was attempting to become the first in my family to attend college. I was also the product of a single parent home, which made my likelihood of affording college tuition and room and board very slim.

The non-profit organization Project SUCCESS proved crucial in helping me overcome all these obstacles. It came into my life in my freshman year at Minneapolis' North High School. The staff of energetic, approachable and caring adults affected my life deeply by challenging my closed-mindedness, providing resources that would have been unattainable otherwise and giving me with the space and time to plan and achieve my goals. The staff of Project SUCCESS and I still remain in close contact because they are like my second family.

My fear is that with all the budget cuts, more responsibility will fall on Project SUCCESS and they need resources to continue and bring their great work to more students in more schools. Teachers and counselors were already over-worked before the budget-cutting began, they needed Project SUCCESS's support as much as we kids did. I hope the public now feels a responsibility to support important supplemental programs like Project SUCCESS so kids like me have a chance.

Project SUCCESS's goal- setting workshops during regular class hours were really important to me because it was the only time in my very busy life that I was actually able to think through my life, my interests, my strengths and my future. As a student who also worked part-time all throughout high school, was editor-in-chief of North High's newspaper, and maintained a respectable grade point average, the special time to focus on myself was really appreciated and needed.

In addition, as an inner city student, it was highly unlikely that I would have the opportunity to see live theater. Project SUCCESS provided me with this opportunity. All kids in the six Project SUCCESS schools are offered between six and 12 opportunities to attend professional theaters in the Twin Cities; theaters like the Guthrie, Orpheum, Jungle. My most memorable live theater experience was going to see Black Nativity with my mother at the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul. Mom and I still have

conversations about that production. Project SUCCESS uses theater to help students see a bigger world and be part of the greater community. Fourteen Twin Cities professional theaters provide the tickets and Project SUCCESS provides transportation and childcare so we kids can go with our families. These family “dates” are sometimes the only fun experiences kids share with their parents.

Finally, Project SUCCESS was instrumental in helping me choose the right college. I did not have the money to visit my top choice schools with all of them being out of state. Project SUCCESS orchestrated a college tour to Chicago, where I had the opportunity to visit my schools. When I walked onto the campus of DePaul University, I knew that it was the right place for me. It felt so different from the other schools that we visited and that I also had applied to; I was able to make an informed decision based on that one, very important trip.

I am now entering into my sophomore year of college at DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois. I am here with the help of many people and programs, but none more significant than Project SUCCESS. Through the attention of caring adults, monthly goal-setting workshops, an exposure to live theater and college tours, students have the opportunity to make the impossible possible. Those experiences catapult you into the future, just as it did for me.

It is critical that all kids get the kind of help and support that Project SUCCESS provides. Resources must be made available to allow them and other youth-centered programs to continue their good work.