



MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

The statistics are shocking. Only about 56% of students who begin college now complete their four-year degree within six years. Even worse is the wide disparity between African-American and white students. Only 42% of African-Americans entering college get their bachelor's degree in six years, versus 63% of white students.

What are some of the factors that keep young people from completing their degrees? Finances. College is now very expensive. When you add up the cost of tuition, books, and transportation alone, even state and community colleges cost more than many families can afford. Academic background. In many cases, the public school system does not properly prepare students for the demands of college work. Social, emotional, and personal concerns. Students may have difficulty in coping with issues from homesickness to time management to dealing with people from different backgrounds.

Today, even middle-class students are having trouble overcoming the odds of finishing college. For low-income students, the odds often seem insurmountable. In addressing this issue at the Harlem Children's Zone, we have aimed high. We are not only interested in helping our children overcome the odds, we have set about to change those odds.

Through all our education and training programs, starting in pre-school, we provide children from low-income families with the same advantages middle- and upper-income children have: safety, academic enrichment, cultural activities, a network of caring adults with the skills and resources to assist children in their growth and achievement.

We are committed to being with our children every step of the way, helping them in every way we can. Our goal is for all our children to go to college, and we have, for years, informally supported them once they enroll in college. About three years ago, we formalized that support by establishing the College Success Office, a small, talented, committed group who work with extraordinary dedication, and extraordinary success, to support our students from the time they begin preparing for college through the choosing and pursuit of their careers upon graduation.

The program is so new that the statistics, though impressive, are preliminary. But the story of CSO, told in the words of the staff and the young students who participate in the program, is already full, rich, and inspiring. We hope you enjoy their story in this latest issue of *A Look Inside*.

GEOFFREY CANADA
President/CEO



College Success Office

"The College Success Office? They are on a mission," says Christian Young, "to get you into college, to keep you in college, to have you succeed. I hate to think of where I'd be right now without them. But I know where I am with them: I'm just a few months away from graduation."

Young is one of 275 students currently served by the Harlem Children Zone College Success Office. The program, begun in December 2004, provides students with year-round academic, administrative, financial, and emotional support.

Though small and relatively new, CSO is ambitious in its overarching goal: to give participants the resources they need in order to become successful college graduates and active members of their communities. To reach that goal, the program's seven staff members will often go to extraordinary lengths.

"CSO thinks you need something, they are there," says Young. "I'm a good example. I never planned to go to college. In high school, I had been in the TRUCE program, and the staff there was always talking up college. In my senior year, CSO encouraged me to apply, but I told them I didn't see college in my future. I just wanted to go right to work. I like working with my hands, fixing things. They convinced me to apply to Lincoln Tech, and when I graduated, I went looking for a job. But with a technical certificate, I wasn't doing so well.

"CSO never gave up. They were always calling, talking about the benefits of college: not just that I could get a good job with good training, but also that I would grow as a person, gain more experience, and have more options.



“Finally, in 2006, with CSO’s help, I filled out some financial aid forms, completed some applications, and was accepted and enrolled at SUNY Delhi, about 200 miles upstate. It’s a two-year school where I could get training in engineering and applied technologies. At first it was great. I loved living in a dorm. I joined a fraternity. I was enjoying my new life. Unfortunately, I had brought with me some of my old study habits. Or I should say my lack of study habits. In high school, I got by hardly studying at all. I’d maybe put in an hour or so before a big test, and I’d pass. I thought I could do the same in college. But college isn’t like that. And pretty soon,

harder, do better. I already know that after I get my two-year associate degree in May, I’m going right back to Delhi to get a certificate in air conditioning. I want to keep building my skills. Working with CSO, I’ve set goals for myself beyond college. I want to go into business for myself, be a project manager in home repairs. There’s a lot of that kind of work that needs to be done in New York City, and it’s a great way to be of service and to make a living at the same time. I feel like I’m on the right path now. And I feel confident that, if I work hard, I’ll be able to make a good life for myself and, eventually, for my family.”

Changing the Odds for Success

If the CSO staff feel the need to take extraordinary measures to help students, it is at least in part because they are up against extraordinary odds. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 56.4% of students who start at a four-year college in the United States complete a bachelor’s degree within six years; and only 23% of students who start a two-year college with the intention of completing a four-year degree achieve it in six years. The college graduation rate for African-American students is 33% lower than the average for white students: only 42% of black students complete a bachelor’s degree within six years of entering college.

CSO staff members have done extensive research on the college graduation gap, and they apply that research in developing and refining the program and in their everyday work with students.

“College is hard enough, but there are so many more challenges facing African-American and Latino students, particularly low-income students,” says Paul Kendrick, CSO assistant director. “College is very expensive now, very hard to finance, even with scholarships, grants, and work-study programs. Middle-income families are having a tough time paying for college; for low-income students, it’s a monumental obstacle. You also need a good foundation to succeed academically in college, and many high schools in inner cities just don’t prepare students well enough. Then there are the social and cultural adjustments on campuses, where minority students often feel isolated. And most colleges just do not, or cannot, support students well enough.

“Look, with not much more than half the students who start college, and only 42% of black students, completing their degree in the U.S., we have a big problem. When I was in school at George Washington University, I saw how some of my close friends were struggling. I helped to found the Williams House for African-American History and Culture there because I could see people I was close to were depressed, isolated, lonely—feeling intense financial, emotional, academic pressures. When I got out of grad school last year, and went looking for a job, I had a real epiphany when I came across HCZ. I read what they were doing and said to myself, ‘Yes, that’s how you change people’s lives: to be

my grades were slipping. At the end of my first semester, my grade point average was 1.98 and I was on academic probation.

“All the while I was away, the CSO staff kept in close touch with me. They’d call me at school, email me. On my breaks, they helped me get an internship. I worked at HCZ’s Booker T. Washington after-school program and earned some money for college. I’d talk and talk with CSO staff about studying harder, but my grades weren’t improving.

“Then one Friday afternoon, I get a call from the desk at my dorm: I’ve got a visitor. Marteen Garay, the CSO program coordinator, is downstairs and would like to see me. I knew Marteen was worried about me, but I never thought she and some other CSO staff members would drive for four hours to help. But that’s what she did. And we spent the day going over different ways to help me study better. Marteen showed me how to set up a study schedule. One technique she explained was especially useful. She showed me how to review reading materials and notes right after every class. For me, the best way was to copy the notes I’d just written, organize them, and write comments on the notes themselves. I take things in better when I’m using my hands. That was a really simple strategy, and it made a big difference. I use it all the time now. And by the end of this last semester, I was able to bring my grade point average up to 3.39.

“In January, CSO made me Student of the Month. I’m really proud of that, but I know it’s just one step. At CSO, they’re always telling you to go for more, try

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in those lives throughout their childhood and to focus on community throughout.’ It was a revelation, and I knew I wanted to be part of it, to contribute. And when this job at CSO opened up, it was perfect.

“CSO is formalizing work that HCZ has been doing informally for a long time. They were encouraging students to get into college, and then responding when students had problems staying in school. Laura Vural, the director of HCZ’s TRUCE program, began putting more structure into the way her staff helped college students. She created the model for CSO, and she now heads the program and guides the way we operate.

“I feel like this office is doing pioneering work. When our nation wakes up and sees what it really means that so few of our students are completing degrees, I think people are going to say, ‘Who’s doing something to help these students get through college?’ And I want to be able to say, ‘We’re doing something, and it’s working.’

“We think big at CSO, and we think holistically. We’ve developed a program that aims to treat students individually and personally and address their needs comprehensively. These students are adults; in the end, they have to do the work themselves. But we are with them every step of the way. And as long as they want to set and meet their goals in school and in life, we are there with the expertise and resources to help.”

Helping Students Over the Long Haul

For some students, like Shawnea Walker, it is the willingness of CSO staff to be there for them over the long haul that matters most. “Ever since I started going to TRUCE when I was 13, I knew that I wanted to have a career in video,” says Walker. “After I graduated high school in June ’04, I went to Pine Manor College, just outside Boston, with a lot of help from TRUCE in filling out applications, financial aid forms, a lot of conversa-

tions about what to expect. I thought I was really well prepared, but I wasn’t ready for the social side of school. I had trouble getting along with some other students. One of them made a habit of harassing me. That went on for a long while, and then one day she and I got into a real altercation. Although she started it, and although the school has a policy against harassment, Pine Manor was threatening to expel me from school. Since I was in CSO, I called them, and they came right down to the college, met with the administrative staff, and straightened everything out. I knew from then on that no matter what, CSO had my back. They were fighting for me.

“I’m always in touch with CSO, and they’ve helped me with everything I’ve asked them for. Last summer, they got me an internship with a small video production group. Next summer, I think, I hope, they’re getting me an internship with Showtime. I want to be a film producer. I know it’s a very ambitious dream, but CSO has shown me how much they believe in me. I want to show them they were right.”

All CSO students come out of the six HCZ programs that do college preparation work: the Booker T. Washington and Countee Cullen Beacons, Learn to Earn, TRUCE, the Employment & Technology Center, and the HCZ Community Center. CSO’s work starts when students are in their senior year of high school. CSO and HCZ staff members work with college counselors at students’ schools and with educational coordinators at HCZ sites, supporting the college readiness process. Staff conduct two workshops to help seniors begin thinking practically about college: one on financial aid and one on how to navigate the college administration system effectively. In the summer following high school graduation, every student is required to have a one-on-one interview with a staff member. During the interview, staff get to know students individually, form a picture of what each one’s main challenges are likely to be, and introduce them to the services CSO provides. Before the interview, students write an essay on the biggest challenges they expect to face in college. For some students, the essay itself represents a big challenge; many students need help with their writing, and the essay provides CSO staff with their first opportunity to help students academically. In their senior summer, if students have successfully completed all their college preparation work, written their essay, and been accepted and enrolled into a college, they are offered a choice of receiving a \$1,000 grant for payment of college expenses or a laptop.

Taking a Comprehensive Approach

From that first summer forward, CSO works extensively with students in six main areas.

Student outreach: CSO checks in with students on a regular basis to make sure they are on track academically, financially, socially, emotionally. At a mini-





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num, freshmen are called four times per semester, sophomores and juniors three times, and seniors twice. Staff members also make use of email, Facebook, text messaging, and other electronic means of communication as well as personal contact. While there is a minimum contact requirement for each student, there is no maximum. Students needing anything from emergency assistance to friendly conversation are encouraged to spend as much time as they need with CSO staff.

Academic support: Much of the direct academic support given to students is in writing. Students are urged to use staff members to help them discuss, outline, edit, and proofread written materials. CSO staff will also assist students with other subjects by helping them find appropriate tutoring and academic support on campus.

Financial aid: Students contact CSO continually for help with a host of financial issues, from how to fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form to how to research and identify scholarship and other grant assistance to how to obtain student loans or enter work-study programs. Staff members work directly with students, completing aid applications, conducting research, explaining programs. They also work with staff at outside agencies, such as financial aid advisors, to keep abreast of the latest information in the field.



Workshops: In addition to their workshops for high school seniors, CSO conducts sessions for college students throughout the year in subjects including college survival, college writing, resumes and cover letters, time management, campus involvement, and public speaking.

Community service: During spring and summer breaks, students participate in community service activities to help them become engaged, caring citizens. Projects have included assisting New Orleans residents with the after-effects of Hurricane Katrina as well as cleaning up local parks in the students' own neighborhoods.

Internships: CSO helps place students in internships within and outside the agency in order to help them gain meaningful work experience and earn money to help defray their college expenses. During the three-week winter break, most students are placed at HCZ sites. In the summer, CSO attempts to place students at outside companies whose work fits the students' academic and extracurricular interests.

The seven-member CSO staff consists of a director, assistant director, three program coordinators, and two AmeriCorps workers, members of the national civilian community corps placed at HCZ. Although each of the staff members has specialized experience and expertise, they work together closely as a team.

Working as a Team

“From the beginning, we’ve always met regularly,” says Marteen Garay, program coordinator, who joined CSO in 2006. “The office is really small now, but it was tiny when we began, so each of us was always aware of what everyone else was doing. It was, and still is, a transparent work environment. But we make a point of meeting formally at least once a week, in addition to informal sharing every day. At our weekly meetings, we learn a lot from one another. Some of us have in-depth knowledge of community development or financial literacy. Some know a lot about career options or education policies. There’s a great deal of knowledge and wisdom within the group.

“Every Monday, we review our caseloads with one another. We each work with 40-plus students. We rely on one another for advice as well as information. I might bring a very specific problem to a meeting: ‘I’m working with a student who wants to transfer from one college to another. I’m not sure whether to encourage her.’ Or we might spend most of the meeting improving our workshops, or expanding the internship program, or exploring different opportunities for our community service program.

“We really respect and count on one another. Every person on staff is totally committed to the program and to every one of the students we work with. Totally. We’re all available to one another and to the students every day all day long. Many days, we don’t leave the office



until 8:30 or 9:00 in the evening. And we'll take a phone call, email, text message from a student long after we've left the office. I think that total commitment and dedication really pays off in our work with students. It makes them feel that they have an entire team behind them, thinking about them, working to help them.

"Why are young people having trouble staying in school? Many students have been told that they must get a college degree in order to be successful, to make money. But it may be that nobody's told them what to expect when they get to college. So when they get there, they may be overcome with a host of challenges, from feeling like they don't fit in to worrying about the financial sacrifices their families are making to not being able to keep up academically. In that case, it's great for students to have someplace they can go where many different people that they trust can help them with the different challenges they are confronting. As one student said, 'CSO is like having lots of parents who don't yell at you, just help you out.'"

One student who takes advantage of the expertise of all CSO staff members is Todd Holland. He joined HCZ's Employment & Technology Center after-school program when he was a junior in high school and worked with the ETC staff and CSO to complete the college application and financial aid process. In fall 2006, he entered Virginia State University as a freshman, eager for new experience and learning.

"I started out with a lot of enthusiasm and interest," says Holland. "I loved the pace of Virginia—slow, not that move-out-of-my-way, New-York fast. I thought I had it down, because I've always had a lot of responsibility, always been the one my family could count on. I had good grades in high school, was in student government, president of my junior class. So I thought I had the discipline and common sense I'd need to get through college, no problem.

"But I realize now that from the first day I was always worried about my family while I was away. My mother works full time, and when I was in high school, I was the one who picked up my two young

sisters after school. Now there was no one to do that. And despite my financial aid package, there just wasn't enough money to cover tuition, books, and expenses. Probably the most serious problem was my own expectations. I was the first person in my family to go to college. My family had very high expectations for me, and I had even higher expectations for myself. Looking back, I see there was no way that I, or maybe anybody, could meet those expectations. So I started to feel disappointed in myself, then depressed. I began procrastinating with my school work. My grades weren't great.

"Fortunately, I had kept in contact with CSO, and they kept in touch with me. When I came home on my first break, I decided to use them as the great resource they are. I met with different staff people, talked about what was going on with me. Some of them were really helpful with how to handle money better, some had great suggestions about improving my study habits. But the important thing was, all of them really knew me, knew my character. They showed me things about myself that I had begun to forget—that I was hard-working, serious, diligent, ambitious. We didn't have to talk about school all the time. We also talked about the big picture: What did I want out of life? How could I make a real contribution?"

"Every one of those CSO staff members stayed on top of me all the time after that. Their attitude was: show us now what you're made of. I finished up my first year at Virginia State, and then last summer I moved home to take the time to figure out what I really wanted to do. I worked on a community service project with CSO, helping to clean up Morningside Park. And for six months, I worked as an intern with the Employment & Technology Center. I realized then that I loved working with young people, that I wanted to be a teacher. Now I've reapplied to college, to schools closer to home mostly. I'll be back in college in the fall, and I know I'm going to stay in very close touch with CSO for the rest of my college years. They helped me to see what it was that I wanted to do with my life, and I know they will really help to keep me on track. I see them as real friends, and I see CSO as my place to relax, to vent, to put a smile on my face. The CSO staff, they make me want to do my best. They are always giving their best. Whatever you ask or expect of them, they give ten times more. Every one of them."

Building Relationships of Trust

CSO staff members take a great deal of pride in the close, trusting relationships they have built with students over time. All staff members are professional, knowledgeable, resourceful; they are constantly upgrading their information, refining their skills. But they view their ability to connect personally with students as the element most critical to success in their work.

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“One word I use a lot in working with students is *options*,” says Mary Hiebert, program coordinator. “This work is about students making the choices that are right for them. It’s true that I, like everyone in the CSO team, have put in a lot of time researching education issues, career issues. We know a lot. And we use what we know to help students. But we are here to empower students, not just to provide services and information.

“So with each student I work with, I try to develop a relationship of trust and understanding. I don’t just tell them, ‘This is the way it is, here’s what you should do.’ I help them examine things

from many angles, look at a range of options, understand the consequences of different choices. The kind of guidance I can offer that’s most effective is to show where various paths lead.

“It’s not been so long since I’m out of college. I’m still very close to the experience these students are having. That’s true of all of us who work at CSO. So I think we have a lot of credibility when we say, ‘Let’s look at what’s likely to happen if you don’t create and follow a regular study routine.’ Or ask, ‘What happened last time when you started skipping classes and falling behind in a course?’

“When the work takes the form of a conversation, rather than a lecture, the students are much more likely to really take in and understand what we’re saying. And they’re much more likely to own the decisions they make. And when they trust us, they know, at a deep level, that what we really want for them is that they choose and follow a path that will lead to their success and happiness, that will help them to become strong, successful, caring, contributing adults. When they understand that that’s our motivation, they are willing to work with us seriously, as partners.”

Providing Support in College and Career

CSO takes a long view of the path each student follows; it starts in high school and it continues past college graduation, on through the career choices students make and pursue. The internship and community service components of the CSO program play a pivotal role in helping students gain experience and credentials in different careers while earning money for school and personal expenses. In addition to work at HCZ sites, the internship program places students at outside organizations including large corporations like American Express, Lehman Brothers, Polo Ralph Lauren, Showtime, and Major League Baseball, as well as small local companies. Some students even work with individuals, such as artists, who need personal assistants or apprentices. CSO staff work closely with students through every aspect of their internships, from choosing the appropriate workplace to understanding professional etiquette to helping students get the most out of their work experience. For many students, the internship, backed up by the support of CSO staff, has been life-changing.

Kenia Duarte began participating in HCZ programs when she was 14 years old, experimenting with a variety of creative projects in the TRUCE program and working as a tutor at the HCZ Booker T. Washington Beacon. “I think those two HCZ programs helped me to realize when I was very young how highly I value both creative and humanitarian work,” says Duarte. “I also knew from early on that I wanted to go to college. My family placed a premium on education, and I always worked hard and got good grades in school. The question for me was not should I go to college but what was I studying for. I loved creative work, especially writing. But I wanted to do something that was of real humanitarian service in the world.

“I graduated high school in ’05. Starting in my senior year, I spent a lot of time in the CSO office. They helped me with things like my financial aid and college applications. But they also were incredibly helpful in getting me to look at academic choices and career possibilities. In the end, I went to NYU and chose a double major, in journalism and public policy.

“In my first two years of college, CSO helped me a lot with my writing. The writing that was expected of me in college, and especially in journalism classes, was a lot more difficult than I had anticipated. The CSO staff were just great, helping me think through stories, revising drafts. They helped me get my skills up to speed.

“A big turning point for me was my internship last summer at American Express. I worked closely with a number of executives, and I got to know them well. All my life, I had heard stories about people from humble beginnings who went on to do great things, but they seemed sort of like fairy tales. When I worked with those people in high positions at a major corporation,



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when I got to talk with them, I realized that a lot of them had come from backgrounds like mine. They got where they are now through hard work, and I realized I could do the same. It really sank in that I could become anything I wanted to be.

“What I want to do, I now know, is to work for the United Nations, probably as a communications officer. When I get out of school, I’m going to get a job first as a journalist and really hone my skills. Then I’m going to put those skills in the service of that great humanitarian organization. I’ve found a way to combine creativity and humanitarianism, the two dominant interests of my life ever since I first joined HCZ. It feels very powerful.”

Other students, like Roman Jackson, feel that their outlook in life has been influenced more profoundly by the community service component of the CSO program. “I thought I always knew what I wanted in life,” says Jackson. “I wanted to work for a big investment firm, be financially successful and productive.

“I had been with TRUCE since I was in the 11th grade, and in my senior year of high school, when CSO contacted me, I was ready for their help. They were terrific, helping me with my college essay, with everything really, from a fee waiver for my application to helping to pay for my travel to visit colleges to filling out financial aid papers.

“I got into Bowdoin College, in Maine, and suddenly found myself in a very different community from the one where I grew up, in New York City. My first two years, I worked hard in school, but I was troubled, unhappy. The work I did in high school had not prepared me for the difficult work that was required of me in college. My grade point average suffered. I decided to take a year off, and through CSO I got a community service job working with HCZ.

“During that year, I began to see how important it was to be of service to my community. I also began to understand, and appreciate, how much CSO—how much all of HCZ, really—had given me. During that year at HCZ, I spent a lot of time at the CSO office. They helped me to realize that, deep down, I didn’t feel I deserved to be in a great college like Bowdoin. Didn’t deserve a successful career in finance. Over time, they made me realize that that just wasn’t true, that I had just as much right to those things as anyone else.

“After I went back to Bowdoin, I got internships through CSO at Lehman Brothers and Morgan Stanley. When I graduated, last year, I knew that I was going to have the career I wanted in finance. I had the preparation, the experience, the contacts. But I decided first to take a year and work for HCZ, to pay them back, in that small way, for everything they had done for me. I’m working now as the media arts director at HCZ’s Community Center. I love it, love teaching young students new technologies.

“When I go into finance next year, I know I’ll bring this other part of me along. No matter what kind of time my primary career takes, I’m always going to find time to give back. I want to be financially successful, and I think I will be. But I also know now that my life will be much poorer if I don’t find a way, always, to be of service to my community.”

Bringing Out the Best in Young People

In a little over three years since CSO began, 296 college students have participated in the program and 36 have already graduated, four from a two-year colleges and the rest from four-year colleges. Of the 260 students actively participating in the program today, only 25, or less than 10%, are not currently in school, and most of those students are expected to return to school in the near future. Those figures contrast highly favorably with the national drop-out rate of 43.6% overall and 58% for African-American students in four-year colleges.

Their early success has made the CSO staff even more ambitious in devising new strategies and expanding the program’s reach. In fall 2007, CSO began holding monthly parent meetings to help build relationships with students’ families. Recent topics have included personal finances and student aid policies as well as a discussion of effective means of advocating for children in college. Attendance at these meetings started out at nearly 30 parents and has been strong every month.





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In the planning stages now are a CSO website, with listings for scholarship resources, jobs postings, and items of general interest to current and potential college students; a peer tutoring program, through which students strong in a given subject would be paid to teach other students; and a student advisory board, which cultivates leadership among participants.

Behind all these new efforts is the same goal that has motivated all CSO’s work from the beginning: to help students get into and through college and on to a successful career and life path. For Sade Greene, like many other CSO students, that goal is now within reach.

“I live in Morrisania, in the Bronx, and heard about HCZ when I was a junior in high school,” says Greene. “I thought to myself: HCZ is doing a lot for the community. This is an organization that’s helping people, and that’s what I’m about, too. So I joined the Countee Cullen teen after-school program. Connecting with HCZ in that way was one of the best things I’ve ever done.

“In my senior year of high school, CSO started working with me, helping me to learn about different colleges, thinking about what schools were best in terms of who I was and what I wanted to learn. They took me through the whole application process, including financial aid. And they were almost as excited as my parents when I got accepted into SUNY Purchase and entered my freshman year.

“My mom and dad instilled a love of education in me, but before me no one in my family had gone to college. My parents wanted the best for me, and they wanted me to get the most out of my education. But because they didn’t have the experience of going to college, they couldn’t know how to guide me. The staff at CSO did have that experience, and they shared it with me, treating me like a family member, helping

me with every problem, every concern, every choice that gave me trouble in school.

“They were there for me when I couldn’t figure out my major. After many conversations with CSO, I finally decided on political science. They encouraged me to participate in a study-abroad program. So I spent a year in Spain, living with a host family, traveling to Italy and Portugal, and experiencing completely different cultures. It opened up the world for me.

“When I told CSO that I was thinking of entering law, they got me an internship in the General Counsel’s Office at American Express, an incredible learning experience, an unbelievable opportunity. But equally important, I’ve done community service, like working at a homeless shelter, through CSO.

“I’ll be graduating in May. I’ve worked hard and got good grades and even won the Chancellor’s Award for Excellence. I’ve applied to Harvard, Fordham, and American University law schools. I’m hoping for Harvard.

“But the best thing is, I know why I want to go to law school. I want to advocate to make life better for people, especially people in low-income communities. My parents instilled in me a sense of service to others, and CSO has deepened that into a real commitment. CSO sees potential in young people, and they cultivate that potential, they bring out your best. They made me understand that if you give people the opportunity and the right support, there’s no limit to the good that they can do.”

In the end, that’s what CSO is all about: bringing out the best in every student. “We’re family,” says CSO Director Laura Vural. “Once young people enter any HCZ program, they become part of the HCZ family. We’re with them through their disappointments and successes. We’re there in an emergency and we’re there when they just want to talk, to sort through things for themselves. We want them to know, because it’s true, that we will do anything to help them become successful in life, anything. We’re there for them.”

That message is clear to Harriet Pickney. “From the moment my son Umallah got into TRUCE, when he was 11, Laura Vural and her staff became part of our family,” says Pickney. “Last year, when Umallah was a senior in high school, everything came down on me. I had a stroke, I lost my mother, we had to leave our home because of a bad domestic situation. I called Laura, and she asked the CSO team to work closely with Umallah, and they moved right in to help. They took Umallah around to different colleges, got his applications and financial aid form filed, got him enrolled in Hudson Valley Community College, which is working out really well for him. I called Laura a little while back to thank her. I told her, ‘CSO did for us just like family, the same as TRUCE. We’ll never forget it. And you and me, we’re sisters until the end.’ ”

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