

Grads overcame all obstacles

By Jeff Theodore
Journal staff writer

Tyise Highsmith, an 18-year-old senior at Jersey City's Lincoln High School, was painfully shy in the past.

She used to be the last one to volunteer to speak in front of an audience. Not that she didn't have confidence. It was within her, but the courage to speak her mind wasn't.

"Now, when I have to speak, I just ask myself, 'What's the worst that can happen?'" said Tyise, who will be a freshman at Rutgers University in the fall.

Tyise credits Fifteen Together, a Jersey City School District program designed to prevent students from dropping out, for being the catalyst to improve her communication skills.

"Communicating was the only thing that was holding me back," she said.

Tyise is one of 333 students who signed up to participate in Fifteen Together when the program began four years ago. Now, she's one of 117 students who, despite a host of obstacles, stuck it out and will graduate this year. They point to Fifteen Together for transforming their young lives.

At a dinner at St. Peter's College Thursday, the district honored the first-ever class of Fifteen Together graduates for sticking with their goals.

"Four years ago, somebody said you wouldn't make it," said Joanne Kenny, the district's associate superintendent for programs and services. "But I wish I had a video camera right now to show every single administrator and official, including those down at City Hall, how wonderful you are."

Year round, students have been able to secure jobs through the program and also lean on mentor-counselors to guide them through personal troubles.

Jose Montalvo and Rainon Melendez, two 19-year-old Dickinson High School seniors, said Fifteen Together has been invaluable to them. Through the program, they both have jobs working in the food service department at St. Peter's College.

"Now, I've worked my way up to being a manager," Ramon bragged.

Jose said his mentor-counselor helped him cope at school.

"I'd go to him to talk whenever there was a teacher I didn't like or if I was having problems with other students," Jose said.

At Thursday's dinner, Jersey City Municipal Court Judge Lewis McRae urged the students to never give up on their dreams.

"Remain steadfast in whatever you decide to go on to do," McRae said, sounding as if he were delivering a sermon. "Set goals and objectives beyond tonight. You're at a point in life where the sky is the limit and there is nothing you can't accomplish."

Liz Shurina, now retired and Fifteen Together's first director, looked at the students and reflected on the past.

"I remember when you all came into the auditorium four years ago either wild and crazy or shy and withdrawn," Shurina said. "Now, you've turned into nice young men and sophisticated young women. But this is one thing I want you to do for me: Whatever encouragement or support you got through this program, please reach out and give back to someone else in trouble."

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