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## For 'Hoop Dreams' scholars, quitting is the only unavailable option

The work of one woman has helped more than 800 inner-city youths better themselves through mentoring, tutoring, and scholarships.

By Melanie D.G. Kaplan, Contributor to The Christian Science Monitor / November 16, 2006

### WASHINGTON

On a rainy Saturday in late September at the University of Maryland campus, dozens of high school seniors begin a yearlong journey – one that they hope will help turn them into college students.

The theme of the day is stepping out into the unknown, and in more ways than one, each student is venturing outside his or her comfort zone. The 82 African-Americans came from Washington, D.C., and have been chosen to participate in Hoop Dreams, a yearlong college-prep, internship, and mentoring program.

Today's full-day orientation includes team-building activities using a climbing wall and a ropes course, as well as discussions about goals, taking risks, and overcoming obstacles. Susie Kay, founder of the Hoop Dreams Scholarship Fund, stands up and tells the students, flat out, what they can and can't do this year:

"You can get scared," she says. "You can get tired. You can lean on each other, support each other, confide in each other. Go to your mentors, family members, and teachers, The only thing you can't do is quit."

The students seem captivated by Ms. Kay's energy. They have committed to attend workshops with their soon-to-be-assigned mentors every Saturday and meet with them two additional times a month until graduation. During the year, they will also participate in writing workshops, math tutoring sessions, SAT prep work, and an internship that typically lasts throughout the school year.

Since the nonprofit was founded 10 years ago, 800 students have been through the program. The scholarships offered by Hoop Dreams – which is funded by foundations, corporations, and individual donors – are actually the smallest part of the program and usually range from \$1,000 to \$5,000. But the organization works with students to obtain additional funding from other scholarship sources. Those sources often significantly offset or fully cover a student's tuition bill, Kay says.

Unlike some scholarship programs, Hoop Dreams does not measure success by the number of college diplomas. Her students still face challenges that don't go away just because they have enrolled in college, Kay explains. "We've had students end up homeless; we've had students end up in jail, and most of them will take five to eight years to graduate," she says.

### Individual attention key

For Kay, success means helping one student at a time and ensuring that there is a place for them to go for support, no matter what

stage they are at. "Money will only take you so far." she says. "It doesn't matter if they don't have the support system."

Chymaria Ball, a sophomore at Temple University in Philadelphia, completed the Hoop Dreams program in the spring of 2005. The valedictorian of her high school class, she credits the organization for the backing and encouragement she receives today. "Ms. Kay taught us how to utilize people around us in the community," says Ms. Ball. "You need that support system when your financial aid goes wrong."

Ball says she still keeps in touch with her mentors, a married couple who works for consulting firms KPMG and BearingPoint. "Hoop Dreams helped me become patient," Ball says, "and helped me transition to life in college."

Leon Morgan, a sophomore and hotel and restaurant management major at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, also graduated from high school in 2005. He returned to Hoop Dreams for help finding two of the three jobs he held last summer. "I want to be a chef," says Mr. Morgan. "So Hoop Dreams made some calls and helped me get a job as a prep cook."

He was also hired by a Washington hotel restaurant, thanks to a contact made by his mentor, Jeffrey Johnson, an entrepreneur who also bought him his first uniforms and chef's knives.

Morgan says a lot of his friends are in jail or still hanging out in the same place they did when they were 12. Although it was difficult to give up Saturdays during his senior year to attend mentoring sessions, he says it was well worth it. Since graduation, he has returned to talk to new seniors in the program about college life.

Networking as an art

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