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Graduates who almost weren't

By **JEFF SHELMAN**, Star Tribune

May 14, 2008

Jasmine McConnell's grades drooped in the low C's at Minneapolis North, and she said education just "wasn't that big of a deal in high school." Harrison Jones graduated from St. Paul's Highland Park, but the specter of costs and debt made him hesitate about college.

Now both are among the first success stories emerging from a promise Minneapolis and St. Paul made two years ago to inner-city students: Stick with education through high school, and we'll make sure you can get to college.

Since then, 767 students have entered the Power of You program, which provides 72 free credits -- about two years of college -- at Minneapolis Community and Technical College, St. Paul College or Metropolitan State University.

McConnell will graduate today from the carpentry program at Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC). On Friday, Jones will graduate from St. Paul College with a two-year degree in American Sign Language studies and will transfer to the University of Minnesota.

Despite its success, the program's future is unclear. So far it has relied on foundation and corporate support. Now a permanent annual state funding request of \$900,000 is before the Legislature. If that falls casualty to the budget battle this week, it is uncertain whether new students will be enrolled for the 2009-10 school year.

The importance of a college education has never been clearer. Over the course of a career, a person with an associate's degree will earn 28 percent more than someone with just a high school diploma, according to a College Board study released last fall. A four-year-college grad will earn 61 percent more.

When Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak, a vocal supporter of the program, makes the rounds each year to address all ninth-graders in the city, he tells them college is worth \$1 million to them over the course of their lives. Then he tells them about the Power of You.

"When those kids hear that the financial barrier is broken down," Rybak said, "then I can look them in the eye and say, 'Look, it's up to you. You deliver, and we'll get you there.' They don't have the excuse of no money anymore."

Dreams within reach

To Jones, the impact of the Power of You on his life is simple: He figures that without it, he would be working a dead-end job.

"It basically provided me an opportunity and made me understand that I can go to college and I can do something with my life despite tuition or my own personal fears," Jones said. "It helped me realize that my dreams are within reach."

McConnell says that, if not for the Power of You, she probably would have been among scores of inner-city high school graduates who put off going to college. Many of those students never get there.

"Without the Power of You, I'd probably just be working a couple of jobs and trying to support myself," she said. Instead, McConnell already has a full-time job with benefits.

The application process is fairly simple: Students apply to their school of choice and fill out a Power of You application and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The Power of You fills any gaps between the cost of tuition and the amount of aid from the federal Pell Grant program and the state's grant program.

More than 60 percent of students who started the program in the first year returned for the second year -- a retention rate higher than that of the overall student body at MCTC and St. Paul College.

Learning to succeed

With a 3.0 grade-point average in high school, the soft-spoken Jones had the ability to succeed in college. But he felt unsure.

"Cost was a big issue," Jones said. "I was applying for scholarships, but it wouldn't have been nearly enough to cover tuition and other expenses. It was too much responsibility coming out of high school. I didn't really think I was ready. What if I'm paying all this money and I fail?"

Now he's excited to move to the U in the fall. After working in the child-care center at St. Paul College, Jones will major in youth studies and wants to work with hard-of-hearing and deaf children.

A teacher at North urged McConnell to consider MCTC's carpentry program.

"We've built homes from the ground up; we've built garages from the ground up," she said. "I think I've learned a wide range of things." Among them: that she can succeed. McConnell made the MCTC dean's list.

"Just because I had bad grades in high school, it doesn't mean I'm going to be a bad student in college," she said.

Giving others the chance

While the program is open to all graduating high school seniors in Minneapolis and St. Paul, it has attracted many students who would not have gone to college otherwise.

The median family income for initial students was less than \$30,000, and three out of four were minority-group members.

McConnell and Jones feel so strongly about the Power of You that they went to the Capitol to advocate for funding.

"When I see friends who aren't going to school and don't have a job, I just think that that could have been me," Jones said.

"A lot of people financially can't afford to go to school without help," said McConnell.

"When I can get a degree for free, that's pretty cool. That goes a long way. It will always be on my résumé and can't be erased."

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