

May 21, 2010

## KIPP graduation day

Culture of college leads all school's seniors to hit goal

By Kenneth Heard

HELENA-WEST HELENA — The one-word salutation on Domonique Bragg's letter from Vanderbilt University was simple, yet life-changing.

"Congratulations," the letter began.

She stopped there.

"I couldn't believe it," she said. "I was shocked."

She remembered a phrase repeated by her parents during her schooling at the Knowledge Is Power Program Delta Public Schools. "My parents said, 'You're not grown until you leave home,'" she said. "I felt like I was growing," she said.

Over the winter and early spring, seniors' acceptance letters from colleges started to roll in. Copies hang on the school walls as reminders for underclassmen.

Eight years ago, when Bragg enrolled in the fifth grade at the KIPP Delta College Preparatory School, the first thing she and her classmates heard was "2010." Teachers wrote the year on chalkboards and banners.

"We were told it was the year we would graduate and go on to college. Since Day One, it was all about college," Bragg said.

On Thursday night, the 23 students in KIPP Delta Collegiate High School's first graduating class stepped onto the stage at Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas and received their diplomas. They also moved toward their futures: All 23 are heading to college.



Photo by Karen Seagrave

Jazmine Climons (left), Abba Colbert and their 2010 classmates celebrate Thursday night at Phillips Community College in Helena-West Helena during the KIPP Delta Collegiate High School's first graduation.

Gov. Mike Beebe, the commencement speaker, said before a crowd of 400 people that this class "transcends the stereotype of the kids in the Delta. "They said you couldn't do it, you couldn't learn, you couldn't perform and you couldn't grab your share of the American dream."

In east Arkansas, where poverty is high and the number of high school graduates going on to college is low, those 23 seniors stand out. Phillips County, with 26,445 residents, has a poverty rate of 34.9 percent. That's more than twice the state's rate of 17.3 percent, according to U.S. Census Bureau figures.

Free or reduced-price lunches - an indicator of families' low income - are provided to 89 percent of KIPP students. At the Helena-West Helena School District, 100 percent of the students are on the free or reduced price lunch program.

In contrast to every KIPP senior bound for college, about 50 percent of Helena-West Helena School District students go on to college.

Statewide, about two thirds of graduating high school seniors enter college, according to the state Department of Higher Education, although about half

need remedial work and just more than one third graduate. Arkansas is 49th out of 50 states with college degrees, according to U.S. census figures.

Bragg, the valedictorian, and KIPP classmate Richard Harris, the salutatorian, will attend Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn., on scholarships. Two others - Ryan Cunnings and Brandon Lewis - have been accepted into the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md.

“This is the chance of a lifetime. I wanted the best for her, but I couldn’t have afforded sending her to Vanderbilt,” Bragg’s father, Darnell Bragg, said of his daughter’s acceptance into the school and scholarship.

Bragg’s classmates have been accepted to the University of Mississippi; Auburn University; the University of Florida; Bennett College in Greensboro, N.C.; North Carolina Central University in Durham; and several Arkansas universities and colleges.

“It’s finally sinking in this week,” Domonique Bragg said last week. “It’s like, ‘Yeah, we’re graduating.’”

The KIPP Delta Public Schools opened in 2002, after executive director Scott Shirey scoured Helena-West Helena, a city of 15,000 residents, for potential students.

Shirey walked through tree-shrouded neighborhoods and past kudzu-covered bluffs, knocking on doors and talking to anyone who would listen.

“I went to kids and their parents and asked, ‘Do you want to try a new school?’” Shirey said.

Parents saw the potential and enrolled their children in the charter school’s fifth grade class - the only grade offered that first year.

Charter schools such as KIPP are public schools supported by taxpayers that operate according to the terms of a charter, or contract, with the state. Arkansas’ charter schools can receive waivers from some rules governing traditional public schools. In return, the state holds charter schools to a stricter level of accountability.

The charter schools receive the same state funding per pupil as traditional public schools but do not receive county millage revenue.

The three-campus charter school program in Helena-West Helena is the only KIPP system in Arkansas. Plans call for a new campus in the KIPP Delta system to open in Blytheville later this year.

Nationally, 82 KIPP schools operate in 19 states and Washington, D.C., with a total enrollment of about 20,000 students.

The structure at the KIPP Delta Public Schools is vigorous: Students attend classes from 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily - a slight change from the original 5 p.m. dismissal time - and on two Saturdays a month. They have homework every night, and teachers are available by cell phone after school.

“It was jail,” said Jessica Walker, a senior who will attend the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff this fall. “But we got used to it. I’ll miss KIPP. It’s like a second home to me.”

The tough structure bonded the seniors, said Cunnings, who compares the school’s regimented schedule to that of the military - something he will experience at the U.S. Naval Academy.

Cunnings enrolled in KIPP when he was in the eighth grade.

“I think all of us are dedicated to education, and that brings us closer,” he said. “School is what you make it.”

The system works, Shirey said. State exam scores show that KIPP Delta Public Schools students score higher than the state average and their peers at the Helena-West Helena School District.

However, not everything is perfect at the charter. When it opened, the KIPP system enrolled 66 students. Eight years later, 23 will graduate. Shirey acknowledged that students either moved away or couldn’t handle the strict regimen and returned to traditional public schools.

Three of the graduates will be required to take remediation courses if they attend a public college or university in Arkansas because their ACT scores were below 19. “We wanted everyone to get over 19 on the ACT,” Shirey said. “But we didn’t hit the mark.

“We can look at numbers, data, percentages and statistics,” he said. “But the most important thing is seeing the kids cross the finish line.”

When students enroll in KIPP, teachers tell them that college is just a continuation of their schooling. Banners from colleges such as the University of North Carolina, Georgetown University and Boston College hang in the elementary classrooms - a constant reminder of KIPP’s mission.

“I think kids want to go to college, but at public schools, they might not know that it’s an option,” said Luke VanDeWalle, the KIPP Delta Public Schools high school director.

VanDeWalle previously taught middle-school classes in the Helena-West Helena School District.

“I had a student who wanted to be an auto mechanic,” VanDeWalle said. “He thought that was his only option. Now, he’s going to go to the University of Central Arkansas to get a degree in mechanical engineering.”

The theme at KIPP is “climb the mountain,” which refers to the hard work required in high school to be accepted into college.

“College is seen as just another school after high school,” said Eboni Giles, a seventh-grader in her first year at KIPP.

“We learn it’s what we want to do next. In the public school, I thought, ‘What’s the use of going to college? I could get a high school degree and do OK.’”

Even the youngest KIPP students learn the culture of college. When first-grader Nilyn Gamble introduces herself, she says she’s the class of 2021 and plans to major in art at Rhodes College in Memphis.

Kyeshia Ward, a senior who received a full-tuition scholarship to UAPB, said going to school at KIPP “was the first time I really had to be attentive. I had to be prepared for learning.”

Harris enrolled when he was in the fifth grade. He was having trouble learning at the Helena-West Helena Public Schools, and his mother, Amanda Harris, said she feared that he might not follow in the footsteps of his four older siblings, who were all headed toward college.

Now he’s headed to Vanderbilt on a scholarship.

It’s helped out a whole lot,” Amanda Harris said. “They are hard on them. They don’t go easy.”

As KIPP seniors’ college acceptance letters filled the school walls this year, Jessica Walker grew anxious. Despite having the fourth highest grade-point average in her class and a good ACT score, she had not received a letter by mid-March.

“I was like, ‘Doesn’t anybody want me?’” she said. “I thought maybe there was someone better out there that got my position.”

She received her first letter in April, one of the last of the seniors to get one. Walker, who plans to attend UAPB, will be the first person in her family to attend college. “I’m making history at KIPP and at my house,” she said. “It’s our destiny.”

When Bragg’s letter arrived at her North Washington Street home on a Saturday, she had mixed emotions. “I was scared,” Bragg said. “I knew things were changing.”

The KIPP seniors spent the past week attending more luncheons and banquets than classes.

On Thursday, they took the next step, donning their caps and gowns and ending their high school careers. “Now, I’m ready to see how many of us will graduate college,” Bragg said. “I hope we’re still at 100 percent.”