

Some college-bound kids making family history

Special challenges often lie ahead

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As the likely Lanphier High School valedictorian for the Class of 2009, Dawn Ray is well on her way to making family history and pursuing a life her mother and father never saw for themselves, especially at age 18.

"She continues to make both her dad and I proud," said Dawn's mother, Melissa O'Bryan. "It's totally a different life than he or I ever had."

Contributing to the difference, O'Bryan believes, will be the university education Dawn receives beginning next fall.

The growing need for a college education to attain career goals is resulting in many high school seniors becoming the first in their families to attend an institute of higher education and obtain a degree. Though such trends often are not tracked at the state level, the National Center for Education Statistics' most recent analysis indicated 22 percent of seniors in 1992 were first-generation students who enrolled in college within eight years.

At the University of Illinois at Springfield, which does track such students, about 11 percent of this year's freshman class is first generation. And at Lanphier, several students in the top 10 percent of the senior class will be first-generation college students, according to assistant principal and senior guidance dean Gina Lamsargis.

These students, as well as their parents, often face unique challenges in both applying and adjusting to college because the experience is so new. But there are high schools, colleges and a few nonprofit groups offering programs to give them the guidance they need.

Dawn always has been a top student — and a busy one. In addition to taking high-track courses, participating in student clubs and being a cheerleader, she teaches gymnastics up to four days a week. Early in her high school career, she settled on a college major.

"Once I realized I was doing so good, college was a big issue for me," she said.

Dawn said her father, Patrick Ray Jr., was the first in his family to graduate from high school.

Her mother, who has her General Equivalency Diploma and works two jobs, took two years' of coursework in medical assisting from Robert Morris College, but she's never put that particular education to use.

Dawn's family considers what she is doing to be groundbreaking.

"My whole family is really proud of me," she said. "I don't see it as anything special; I just go to school and do my work. But it's such a big deal for them."

Being a first-generation student brings with it a lot of pride — and pressure. Such students often require additional guidance in their college hunt, significant financial aid opportunities and support systems when they arrive on campus. When a student grows up in a family that hasn't been down this path before, the trailblazer often has a learning curve to overcome.

For Dawn, the experience has gone smoothly, partly because of her determined character, as well as Lanphier's post-secondary coaching program and support at home.

Both of her grandparents were ill during Dawn's childhood, so she was inspired to pursue medical lab sciences as a college major and someday become a researcher to "find out about cures and how different things affect different people," she said.

Her top college choice is Marquette University in Milwaukee, which accepts about 24 students into its medical lab sciences program each year. For three weekends in November, Dawn drove to the campus to take part in a scholars program geared toward students interested in the major. At least one of her parents made the trip with her each time.

"My mom is always really interested in it. I've brought home lots of books — parent books and stuff — from Marquette and she's been reading them," she said. "And my dad has just been there, saying, 'Whatever you need, whatever you need.'"

Lamsargis said the parents of Lanphier's first-generation seniors this year have been a "key piece" in their success.

"That's the key — having someone else," she said. "There's a school push on these kids, but there's also a home push."

This isn't always the case. According to the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's Freshman Survey from 1971 to 2005, parents of first-generation students in general show less support both during the college search and once they've begun attending school than do parents who have been to college.

It may be particularly hard for parents to have their first college-bound child far from home; first-generation students often attend community colleges nearby or other schools within 50 miles, according to the CIRP survey. Marquette is a 280-mile drive for Dawn, and she's been warned that the medical lab sciences program allows for little time off during breaks.

But it's a price she's willing to pay. Eventually, she hopes to attend graduate school as well. "I'm planning on school — a lot of school," she said. "I'm going to go as far as I possibly can."

Cheldon Brown has lived down the street from Dawn since the two were sixth-graders at Lincoln Magnet School. Like Dawn, he is in the top 10 percent of his class at Lanphier — No. 9 to be exact — and the first in his family to be college-bound.

His mother, Caroline Brown, and sister, Chilyn Fisher, both have taken some classes at Lincoln Land Community College. Cheldon, however, is heading to a four-year university next fall. One of his two possibilities is an Ivy League school, Princeton University. He's also looking at Marquette.

"It's always been something I've wanted to do," he said of attending college. "That's probably because when you're little, your parents always say, 'Go to college.' ... I never thought I'd be going to a school that was so far away until it came that I was actually looking at schools."

Cheldon's potential college must meet three major criteria: It must offer computer engineering as a major, provide an intimate learning environment and have a track team so he can continue his success as a high jumper. He's visited Marquette and Princeton twice this year, once informally and later as part of an official track visit. He hopes to earn both an academic and athletic scholarship.

Lamsargis said she's been impressed with how Cheldon's mother has become involved in learning the ins and outs of applying to an Ivy League school. Cheldon said his grandparents also have played a key role in nudging him toward college.

"My grandparents are always asking (me and one of my friends), 'What school are you going to next year?' They never ask us, 'Are you getting a job?'"

For the past six years, Lanphier's guidance staff has made special efforts to ensure each graduate leaves with a post-secondary plan, whether it's college, vocational school, a job or the military. Lanphier students' college-entrance rates have surged from 35 percent in 2003, when the program started, to 83 percent this past spring.

This school year, three employees are dedicated to helping the senior class.

In addition to Lamsargis, guidance dean Heather Hartman assists with scholarships, and post-secondary coach Steve Rambach helps with everything from the college hunt to military entrance requirements and financial aid.

The Lanphier Educators and Parents program, which Rambach orchestrates, helps students become less intimidated and more knowledgeable about college by offering informational programs for students at all grade levels. The school also organizes campus visits.

"A lot of students have never been on a campus until we take them there," Lamsargis said. Cheldon said he appreciates the support he's received both at school and home.

"It feels good that I've been able to get the grades I've gotten and been able to have this opportunity to go to college," he said, "because I know not everybody has this opportunity, when it comes to money or they just don't have what it takes to do it."

Quentin Winder had just finished eighth grade when he realized he was likely to be the first of his family to graduate from high school, let alone be college-bound.

The Calvary Academy senior has overcome a lot of odds to stay on the right path. His family, which includes two older siblings, has been broken up for most of his 18 years. He's never lived with his mom, and his dad "wasn't around."

"I grew up in a lot of different places," he said.

Eventually, he found a home with Sheryl and Mike Mulhall, a Petersburg couple whose youngest son, Tyler, met Quentin more than eight years ago at Calvary. The Mulhalls later became Quentin's foster parents.

Still, he has a relationship with his mother, two older siblings and four nieces and nephews, and they often talk about his education and where it will take him, he said.

After that moment following his eighth-grade graduation, Quentin said he was "really motivated" to do well in school.

"I was ready," he said. "First of all, I had to make the grades. I kind of struggled making good grades when I came here. Then, that kind of faded away and made it easier for me to make them."

Today, he receives mostly B's and A's.

In addition to his guidance counselor at Calvary, Quentin's caseworker through the Illini Christian Ministries foster care program has been helping him with his college hunt, including researching schools online and taking Quentin for campus visits. Sheryl Mulhall, who works in Calvary's school office, will take Quentin on visits later this winter when he narrows down his search.

He hopes to make a decision by March.

Many of Quentin's potential schools are Christian colleges with basketball teams, which he hopes to be part of.

He doesn't expect the transition to be easy, but both his foster family and his biological family, especially his nieces and nephews, have provided inspiration to stay on track.

"Most people, they have good plans, but they don't follow through," he said. "I've seen a lot of people do that — say they are going to be this, and then they don't."

But, he said, he has plenty of good reasons to stick with it.

"I want to be the leader in my family," he said. "My little nieces and nephews will have someone to look up to."

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