

Building a Bridge

From Homelessness to Higher Education

by Lee Erica Elder

Transitioning from high school to college often marks many firsts—the first time away from home, the first time living on one’s own, and the first time making decisions independently on a constant basis. It is an intense, unique time in life, when a young person is surrounded by peers with similar goals, exposed rapidly to new experiences, and given often-unprecedented freedom to learn and explore. Entering this phase of life while homeless, or unstably housed, means that the ensuing challenges can quickly become barriers to progress.

Here, UNCENSORED looks at organizations and individuals around the country working to analyze, address, and alleviate these challenges, and talks to scholars who have overcome homelessness to pursue higher education.



Joe Lagana, founder and CEO of Homeless Children’s Education Fund, joins Tierra Moses at the Bookends event in October 2014. Tierra spoke at the event, sharing her triumph over homelessness and other adversity.

Kat's Story

Kat Allison, 21, is a junior at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin.

Her childhood was turbulent—she spent time in foster and group homes and was homeless, all before turning 18. “I struggled to finish high school,” she says. “Although I was highly energized and motivated to continue my education and pursue a college degree, the year after my 18th birthday was spent living on couches and relying on friends.”

Allison pays for her college education through full-time work and with the help of scholarships. “I have worked extremely hard to overcome the adversities of my recent past and work towards a successful future. I faced challenges in working and focusing on my studies while preoccupied with the looming issues accompanied by breaks and vacations. I’ve had very little housing stability—I once moved five times in an academic year. It’s very hard to find places to store my belongings, let alone move them, as I have everything I own with me.” She has received help with housing and financial aid thanks to Lawrence staff, but is concerned about those flying under the radar. “There is little known about the community of homeless students that exists within every larger community,” she says. “I am one of a handful of Lawrence students with a homeless status; however, there are thousands of homeless students within the greater Appleton community. I sincerely hope that more resources, especially scholarships, will become available in the near future.” Allison hopes to attend law school and funded her own study-abroad trip to Argentina, where she will be living until September of 2015.

Understanding Barriers to Higher Education

Allison’s experience illustrates why supportive services are critical. Many children who have experienced homelessness are determined to do well in high school and attend college, but

lack of familial support increases the difficulty of accessing resources. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and other official forms often require information that students do not have. “Imagine being a 17-year-old whose parents didn’t attend college, and you have to figure out FAFSA paperwork on your own,” says Carrie Pavlik, education services manager at Homeless Children’s Education Fund (HCEF) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. “You might especially need these college loans because homelessness had a negative effect on your attendance and grades in high school, making it difficult for you to get an academic scholarship. You may not ask your guidance counselor for help in this area because you don’t want them to find out you are homeless.”

HCEF piloted a new scholarship last year, the Hope Through Learning Award. “We designed our award to help students overcome barriers to transitioning into post-secondary education, such as covering child care or transportation expenses,” says Laura Saulle, HCEF’s assistant executive director. “We’re also envisioning a support network that provides students with mentoring from peers

Nikkiya is all smiles as she celebrates her graduation from the Dorsey Schools/Penn Foster’s high school completion program. Nikkiya dropped out of school by age 12 but found the resources she needed to achieve lasting success.





Tierra and TiAnn Moses share a prized moment with Pittsburg Steeler Troy Polamalu at the Homeless Children’s Education Fund’s Bookends event. Troy spoke to the audience about his Superbowl experience while Tierra shared her journey through homelessness at the “fundraiser” hosted by former Steeler Andy Russell.

and educational experts to help them transition to higher education.”

For 16 years the National Center for Homeless Education has run the United States Department of Education’s technical assistance center for education for homeless children and youth. “Initially our work focused on K–12 education, specifically with the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act, but there has been a natural evolution of the focus to homeless youth transitioning to and attending post-secondary education,” says Diana Bowman, the center’s director. “We work very closely with the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) on this issue, including developing a toolkit for supporting the needs of homeless youth in college.” The two groups collaborate on a helpline (1-855-446-2673), which launched in 2012. Cykeia Lee, NAEHCY’s director of higher education initiatives, has helped students find food, housing, and financial aid assistance through the helpline. Since its inception Lee has heard from more than 400 students,

75 percent of whom had already been admitted to or were attending college. “The higher education barriers and struggles start when they get there,” she says. “My goal is to build a bridge between the higher education world and the homeless education world. I help facilitate conversations about the definitions of homeless youth and outline the barriers they experience so these two systems can work together.” She also cites the importance of identifying a single point of contact on a college campus, a person who operates similarly to a McKinney-Vento liaison for a school district, identifying resources and advocating on students’ behalf. “They connect students to on-campus supports (housing, financial aid, academic advising, and counseling) and off-campus supports (food and clothing banks, shelters, transitional housing, and community mental health and social services),” says Lee.

Since 2011 the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators has collaborated with NAEHCY for the purpose of training financial aid administrators to work

with homeless students. The group's director of training initiatives, Jennifer Martin, chairs NAEHCY's Higher Education Services Committee. "These students' circumstances tend to exacerbate and amplify issues that other students may find easy to resolve. A relatively small issue, such as a \$55 housing deposit, could be enough to keep a homeless student from enrolling in college," says Martin.

Even if services are available, many students won't identify as homeless for fear of stigma. "It's not easy for students to disclose they are homeless," says NAEHCY's Lee. "That comes with many assumptions about them and their families. Identity is a challenge—a lot of colleges don't want to admit that they have young homeless students on their campus, so many students don't want to share their status."

Tierra's Story

Tierra Moses is a 21-year-old certified medical assistant at Allegheny General Hospital in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Moses recently moved into an apartment of her own and plans to become a registered nurse. When she was a child, she and her family were often homeless, moving from shelter to shelter, and two of her older brothers were killed as a result of street violence. She graduated third in her class from both high school—with a 4.0 grade point average—and Pittsburgh Technical Institute, where she earned an associate degree. "I never let being homeless, moving around, not having a stable place, or living in a shelter—break me down," she says. "I knew I wanted to go to college. I've been on the honor roll my whole life. I studied every day in college. It was a once in a lifetime experience." In 2013 she was honored with the Homeless Children's Education Fund Resiliency Award for her determination with regard to her education and future.

Two colleagues join volunteers, students, and staff to honor the most recent high school and college graduates from Students Rising Above at the annual GRADWalk barbeque in San Francisco.

Programmatic Interventions Around the Country: Community-based Organizations and Educational Liaisons as a Bridge to Higher Education

When young people have to choose between helping their families—by working and seeking shelter—and going to school, community-based organizations and educational liaisons can step in to bridge the gap between homelessness and higher education. Such groups are integral components in making post-secondary education possible, mobilizing support to meet students' basic needs and creating the space and freedom necessary to explore higher learning. "I have worked with quite a few students over the years who stopped coming to school because living was the priority," says Shaun Rasmussen, educator and associate director of Something Positive, a New York City-based performing arts and education organization. "Trying to get into shelters, protecting themselves, or finding friends or relatives to stay with is their focus," he says. "Some students engage in risky behavior—selling drugs, gang activity, prostitution—to secure a roof over their heads and a meal for a night." Rasmussen, who has worked



for a variety of community-based organizations, believes exposing students to options is half the battle. “It’s really important for students to know what’s possible.”

New York City–based Good Shepherd Services’ Young Adult Borough Center (YABC) programs offer alternative options focused on post-secondary planning, whether for college, vocational programs, or the workforce. These programs go beyond the classroom to provide resources and stability for students in transient housing situations. “In order to maximize their experience, they need to feel a sense of belonging,” says Pascale Larosiliere-Solon, program director of the YABC at Franklin K. Lane High School in New York City. “We often refer students to Good Shepherd’s Brooklyn LifeLink Program, which works as a bridge to assist students transitioning to college through academic and social support. Students participate in Life After High School workshops that familiarize them with resources offered on campus, and the role of their academic advisors. An additional resource is Good Shepherd Services’ mentoring program, where mentors work with young adults living in Good Shepherd group residences, supportive housing programs and foster boarding homes across New York City,” she says. Larosiliere-Solon, whose background is in social work, believes that working with students on time management is an important part of preparing them for college, given these students’ added responsibilities of maintaining housing and financial

support. “Many people underestimate the mandatory appointments that students must attend in order to sustain themselves in housing and maintain good standing,” she says. “The process of going from one appointment to another, going to school, and maintaining a curfew (required in certain housing situations), can be undeniably overwhelming to the young person.”

In Austin, Texas, Project Pathway is in its second year of service to 50 students transitioning to post-secondary education. “Students write and practice presentations, learn rules of etiquette and financial best practices, and acquire life skills,” says Cheryl Myers, education specialist at the Homeless Education Program at Education Service Center Region 13, which offers Project Pathway. “Through our education program and support from the Texas Homeless Education Office, we also offer assistance to the homeless liaisons from 17 school districts in our region. The liaisons invest in students—they take them on college tours, help with FAFSA awareness, plan college night at high schools, and help with credit recovery for graduation.”

Massachusetts’ Special Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth estimates that there are 6,000 unaccompanied homeless youth in the state. YouthHarbors helps these students become stably housed and graduate from high school. The program began when homeless students at Malden High School, in Malden, Massachusetts, who

Two attendees enjoy the annual GRADWalk event hosted by Students Rising Above. Every June, more than 300 students, volunteers, and staff gather in San Francisco for the annual barbeque, which honors the organization’s most recent high school and college graduates.



were not affiliated with the channels through which interventions are often made—foster care or state and federal systems—needed services. “We had a group of students that were homeless that no one knew about,” says Executive Director Danielle Ferrier. “We opened our first site in October 2009, and essentially have added one each year. In our first year, 96 percent of the students in our program were housed at the end of the year, and the same percentage had either graduated or were on track to graduate.” Sixty percent of YouthHarbors’ population has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Developed with school staff and specialists, IEP’s outline special learning needs and mandate necessary educational assistance; staff work carefully with students on applications to make sure colleges are aware of their needs. Through their alumni program, YouthHarbors encourages students to remain engaged with the organization after graduation, helping them coordinate college housing and granting \$50 checks for keeping in touch with staff on an annual basis.

San Francisco, California–based Students Rising Above serves 1,100 students, all low-income—61 percent live below the federal poverty line—through college prep workshops, mentoring, financial assistance, literacy programs, health care services, career guidance, and leadership development. One hundred percent of Students Rising Above’s high school graduates are accepted into four-year colleges or universities, and 98 percent enroll in those schools, from which 90 percent graduate within 4.5 years—eight times the national average for low-income, first-generation college students. “One student told us that he knew more people in his neighborhood who had been shot than who went to college,” says Lynne Martin, executive director. “Students are living without electricity, food, or running water—in garages, or in cars, or like one student, with 17 other people in a two-bedroom apartment. Many suffer from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, but can’t afford counseling. They are living without functioning parents, or their parents died, or abandoned them. You can’t learn when you’re hungry or emotionally grieving.” Their Colleges2Career Hub—an online community for first-generation college students—serves 750 young people. Students Rising Above also assigns every student an advisor. “For many students, their advisor is the first consistent adult in their life, and this relationship extends well beyond college graduation,” she says.

Nikkiya’s Story

By age 11, Nikkiya Gentry, of Detroit, Michigan, was living on the streets. She had dropped out of school by age 12.

Eventually she was able to move in with a cousin and enrolled in Dorsey Schools/Penn Foster’s high school completion program. After receiving her high school diploma, she completed Dorsey’s culinary arts program. “I have something I can say is mine,” she says. “Without words, you are able to taste and feel what I achieved. I want to be able to build something, to leave a mark.”

Risks Facing Homeless Students

Young adults experiencing homelessness are very likely to be food-insecure. These students may not meet a strict definition of homelessness, but their lack of resources still means they are in great danger. While there are not exact numbers detailing food insecurity among college students nationwide, a 2014 Oregon University study showed that more than half (59 percent) of all students surveyed were food-insecure sometime during the previous year. “They may have housing, but have to make decisions about buying food now vs. books for the semester,” says Jennifer Martin of the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators.

Some students engage in risky behavior—selling drugs, gang activity, prostitution—to secure a roof over their heads and a meal for a night.

The Campus Awareness, Resource & Empowerment Center (C.A.R.E.) at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, Georgia, helps students who are homeless, housing-insecure, or food-insecure or who are or have been in foster care. Services include case management, food, clothing, and emergency shelter. “Our pantry through the C.A.R.E. Center offers food to any student who requests it,” says Kennesaw’s associate director for counseling and psychological services, Marcy Stidum, who is also the C.A.R.E. coordinator. “If they need additional provisions, we also offer linens and personal support items.”

Significant changes in a young adult’s life—such as transitioning from high school to college—can often trigger emotional and mental health issues. Ferrier, from YouthHarbors, believes that in addition to traditional mental and emotional health support, strong communities and networks are vital to stability. “I think that what is equally important and as therapeutic is a network, a community for homeless students,” she says. “When they get to college and are stably housed, but they still don’t have that person they call when they are not sure what to do—



More than 125 students, volunteers, and staff gathered at the Orinda Country Club for the Students Rising Above Garden Party.

their risk is still really high. We reduce risk factors for trauma by focusing on communities and networks, so when they leave us, they have that person whose house they go to on a holiday, and the person they call in crisis.”

Continuing Education

There is still much to do to ensure that students are stably housed and able to pursue higher education. “Locally, we need campus awareness of homeless students and better ways to identify them and link them to services; statewide, more networks that include a coordinated approach between single points of contact and local school district homeless liaisons and youth service providers; and nationally, advocacy for laws and policies for strengthening supports and access to financial aid for homeless students,” says Bowman from the National Center for Homeless Education. “Awareness is key for understanding their unique needs. It’s important to remove the barriers they face so that they can continue in college and be successful academically.”

Interventions are integral to keeping students in college once they matriculate. “Our research tells us that the same challenges that prevent youth from graduating from high school can also spill over into their college years,” says Jonathan Zaff, executive director of Center for Promise, the research arm of America’s Promise Alliance—a partnership of national organizations dedicated to improving the lives of youth—in Washington, D.C. “We must remember that while getting eco-

nomically and socially disadvantaged youth through the high school graduation door is an important milestone, we must be diligent in putting the resources and support in place that will help keep them moving to the next doors, of college, work, and life.”

Whether a student pursues a two- or four-year college or a vocational program, a successful transition into higher education establishes a sense of ownership and agency. Thanks to the many organizations and individuals dedicated to improving the lives of homeless students through both programming and policy, more young people are managing the challenges of housing insecurity and achieving their dreams of attending college. “These young people struggle to have the basics (food, water, shelter, and clothing) while trying to do their very best,” says NAEHCY’s Lee. “They need all the support they can get along the way. Some of them have indicated that there was a special teacher, mentor, counselor, or social worker that really pushed them because they could see their potential. Others may have already been affiliated with a college access program or bridge program that encouraged higher education access. I have had homeless students get accepted to prestigious private colleges, some [who] transition from community college to really great universities. Some have received their bachelor’s degrees and are going to graduate school. I have seen some students go from living in a car to getting their first apartment. They know that education is the key to getting them out of poverty.” ■