

New York Program Gives Boost to Promising Medical Students

BY SURIA SANTANA

An aspiring physician, Darlene Gabeau had three strikes against her: she was black, female and the daughter of Haitian immigrants.

Only 5-years old when her parents separated, Gabeau spent a part of her childhood in New York City homeless shelters with her single mother.

The odds were stacked against her.

When she reached ninth grade, Gabeau decided she wanted to go to medical school, so she joined what is now called the Gateway Institute for Pre-College Education, a pipeline program that helps promising students from disadvantaged backgrounds get on track to medical school. The high school enrichment program has provided thousands of low-income and minority students from New York City's public schools with a top-notch scientific education, preparing them for careers in medicine, engineering and other science fields.

"Darlene was a great girl, but not the best student," said Morgan Slater, Ph.D., Gateway's director. "She had to work hard at it every step of the way."

Gabeau successfully completed the Gateway program and, a few years later, medical school. This past June, she became the poster child for every minority pipeline program by accomplishing the unthinkable: she earned an M.D.-Ph.D. from Yale University.

More than 2,200 students have graduated from Gateway since 1990, and 95 percent of them have enrolled in four-year colleges. A recent survey showed that

13 percent of Gateway's graduates attend medical school, which is 40 times the national average.

Gateway is the first high school program in the city to give students access to advanced DNA labs. However, access to the best science is not the only reason for the program's success, according to Dr. Slater.

"If you come to a Gateway graduation, you hear alumni talking about how they became part of a family," he said. "Having teachers who care about their students changes the nature of school."

When describing the "Gateway family," Dr. Slater depicts a team of teachers who "follows kids around to make sure no one disappears."

"We do what we can to find out if there is anything getting in the way of the students' education," he said. "If you catch the problem early, there is hope."

Following the Pipeline

After graduating, many Gateway students make a stop at the Sophie Davis School of Biomedical Education on their way to medical school where they receive a B.S. and complete two years of basic science courses. After passing Step 1 of the U.S. Medical Licensure Examination, students transfer for the third year to one of six medical schools in New York state (SUNY at Stony Brook, SUNY at Downstate, Syracuse University, Albany Medical College, New York University and New York Medical College).

Sophie Davis began 30 years ago as a program to increase access to medical and health training for inner-city youths, particularly underrepresented minorities.

The school recruits and trains physicians from underserved minority populations and later encourages them to deliver services to needy communities.

The composition of the student body indicates that the school is successfully recruiting minorities. Last year's entering class was 34 percent African American and 15 percent Latino, according to Dani McBeth, M.D., associate dean for student affairs at Sophie Davis.

Programs such as Gateway and Sophie Davis are contributing significantly to the education of minority physicians in New York, in his opinion.

"If these students had gone to college through a traditional route, only some of them would make it to medical school, because we all know how treacherous the premedical curriculum can be," said Dr. McBeth.

One such student is RajaNandini Muralidharan, 21, an immigrant from India. Muralidharan is the first person in her family to attend college and is on her way to medical school next year. This summer, she will research the effects of cocaine use during pregnancy in a New York laboratory.

Tiffany Newman, 22, Muralidharan's classmate, will be doing AIDS research in Kenya as part of a student fellowship. Next year, she will be attending medical school at New York University.

Both Muralidharan and Newman think that one of the best aspects of the Sophie Davis program is the diversity of its student body.

"When we go out to do clinical rounds in the community, we realize we know something about many of our patients' cultures because of what we know about our colleagues," said Newman.

Even faculty can learn from students in this environment, according to Dr. McBeth.

"I probably learn as much from my students in the area of cultural competence as they do from me," he said. "There are many things about our school that lead to a graduate that is quite competent in that regard." ■



Morgan Slater, Gateway director