

Amber: Metro is next stop for Benson graduate

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the nation's 100 largest metropolitan areas, with 35.7 percent of blacks here living in poverty compared with 25.3 percent of blacks nationally. The figures represent a three-year average from 2005 to 2007, according to David Drozd at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Amber never knew her father. Her mother had struggled in the early years to keep the family together. Three brothers dropped out of school and got in trouble.

Tuesday night, Amber graduated from Benson High School.

When last in the news, Amber, then age 16, was a sophomore who had found a home in theater.

She had distant goals of becoming the first in her family to graduate from high school and to attend college, though she had no concrete plans on how get there.

Fate intervened.

A swell of anti-poverty efforts was coalescing, and a new **foundation** was seeking high school seniors for its first group of college students to support.

The **Bright Futures Foundation**, which is supported by several Omaha philanthropists and corporate leaders, is working with the separate Building **Bright Futures** to shore up educational opportunities for poor children.

The **foundation** wanted first-generation college students and sought those who wanted to attend but might not be able to, given the maze of applications, fees and deadlines and the leap into the unknown.

Amber happened to be at one of the right schools — Benson. The two others are Northwest and Ralston. She was the right age, a senior. She had the right background and, Gallup testing revealed, the right mix of pluck and hopefulness.

She was selected for one of 175 spots in the **foundation**'s nascent Avenue Scholars program. Most of the students will still be in high school next year as Avenue Scholars staff works with them on college readiness skills.

Amber is in the first group starting a two-year program at Metropolitan Community College. Seventeen other 2009 Benson, Northwest and Ralston High graduates will join her on campus June 7 for orientation.

They will move into dorms and spend the summer in a highly structured program easing them into college and life. They will learn about money management, human relations and how to study for college.

A mix of scholarships, financial aid, work-study and the **Bright Futures Foundation** will cover all costs, and students will be paid a stipend.

An educator, called a talent advisor, will have access to their grades and attendance and will help them for their two years at Metro and beyond.

The talent adviser for Amber and other Avenue Scholars at Metro is a 35-year-old former Lincoln Public Schools and University of Nebraska-Lincoln educator who knows how difficult it is to jump from high school to college.

Giovanni Jones was the oldest of three children raised by a single mom. When Jones graduated from Benson High in 1991, the family's annual income was \$10,000. Still, she got into Nebraska Wesleyan University and graduated with a teaching degree. She later got a master's in administration.

Jones sees her own struggles reflected in students like Amber and knows that with a little guidance, there's no limit to what she can achieve.

Amber believes that, and she told the audience gathered to celebrate Avenue Scholars that the benefits don't end with her: "My younger siblings will believe they too can be successful, because I will pave the way."

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