

Equalizing Earning Potential = Billion-Dollar State Impact

If all racial and ethnic minorities in Nebraska had the same educational attainment as whites, the total annual personal income for the state would increase by one billion dollars.

That 2008 figure from the National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education shows the economic impact, in dollars, of the achievement gap between Nebraska's white and non-white populations.

One billion dollars. And that's just in Nebraska.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Omaha has more black children in poverty than anywhere in the United States. It happened gradually, eluding much notice until it attracted national attention with its ranking. The census figures were echoed by 2003-2007 *Kids Count* data, which showed that Omaha kids fare worse than the state average in every category they studied – poverty, children in single-parent families, teens not attending school and not working and more. A six-square-mile area of north Omaha is where poverty, violence and hopelessness are the most concentrated.

Better education leads to better jobs and higher income, and that means the social and emotional costs that go along with poverty gradually diminish. As a result, Omaha may be able to build and retain a black middle class.

The Birth of "Intrusive Support"

Dr. Ken Bird, a longtime educator and retired superintendent of the Westside school system, met with Omaha philanthropists to discuss the issue. The group decided the situation had gone on too long, especially in a relatively wealthy city. Bird was hired June 1, 2008 as Chief Executive Officer of Bright Futures Foundation; he brought in Dr. Jef Johnston, also a longtime educator and program-builder, as Chief Operating Officer. Plans for the Bright Futures Foundation and its Avenue Scholars program took place quickly, between a very few people with funds, passion and experience. Staff members were added with great care. They chose Wayne Brown as Avenue Scholars Project Director, then longtime teachers Cris Fishback and Giovanni

Jones. Fishback serves as the program's first High School Talent Advisor and Jones as the first College Talent Advisor.

The Avenue Scholars program is a never-been-done-before "intrusive support" concept for low-income kids with academic potential and resiliency. Its mission is to support students of talent from high school through college and into careers so they can have enhanced careers and lives, Johnston said.

"The donors, who are now on our board, got together and gave Dr. Bird a mission – to fix this,"

said Brown. Brown grew up in Omaha and found his way out of the cycle of poverty; he graduated from law school in Omaha and received a job offer from a major company in Atlanta. Instead of taking the offer, Brown decided to stay in Omaha and give back to his community through Bright Futures.

"This city birthed me, it made me successful. There's enough room for more stories like mine. I can't leave it like this," Brown said.

Brown said that growing up in that six-square-mile part of Omaha, you knew it was bad, but you thought everybody else knew, too. But the way the city is designed, he said, you don't drive through it so it escapes notice.

And until recently, so have the kids.

How Avenue Scholars Works

The 2009-2010 academic year will be Avenue Scholars' first official year of operation in the schools, though the team has begun work already. Twenty-five junior students and 25 senior students from each of three high schools will be selected for the first year of the program in schools chosen as the program's pilot schools – Ralston, Omaha Benson and Omaha Northwest. In coming years, additional schools and students will be added, along with more Bright Futures staff members.

Shortly after the high school students are selected, they will be introduced to their talent advisors and to the rest of the student cohort.

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- Giovanni Jones,
Bright Futures Foundation

BRIGHT FUTURES FOUNDATION



Cris Fishback



Giovanni Jones



Dr. Ken Bird



Dr. Jef Johnston



Wayne Brown

Photos Courtesy of Bright Futures Foundation

"The model is going to have us in virtually daily contact with the young people we serve," Fishback said. "I will be teaching a college access and success course in our first three pilot schools," he said. If there are barriers to student success, Fishback and the talent advisors in the high schools will know right away and will be there to help push aside the barriers. Through the program, students will have access to tutoring, programs and activities, will be able to take college credit courses and will be coached through the process of preparing applications for college. Although the program won't give students money for college, advisors will help them find scholarships and complete the applications.

At the end of the students' senior year, Fishback and other high school talent advisors will pass them along to Jones and other post-secondary talent advisors, who will help them adjust to college life.

"As one of the post-secondary talent advisors, what I do is help to eliminate barriers, excuses and reasons," Jones said. If students don't feel comfortable in the college campus atmosphere, Jones and the other post-secondary advisors will spend the summer helping them become connected. "We'll show you everything from the cafeteria, to what it's like to take college courses, to moving into the dorm," she said. Post-secondary talent advisors will keep track of students on campus...listening, offering advice, answering questions... maybe even offering a home-cooked meal.

"What we're going to do is take some of that shame out of it, the shame of not knowing, and just empower students with information and resources," Jones said. She calls it self-advocacy.

Jones also grew up in north Omaha, and is thankful that her mother wanted the best for her and signed her up for every free program she could find. Her mother didn't have the experience, but she taught her daughter to overcome the embarrassment of not knowing...which Jones hopes to pass along to others.

The Task of Choosing Avenue Scholars

There are about 22,000 juniors and seniors in Douglas and Sarpy counties; those counties are the focus of Bright Futures right now. About 35 percent of those students, Bird said, are eligible for free and reduced lunch in the public school system, which parallels eligibility for tuition assistance. That means there are 7,000 students from whom to choose as Avenue

Scholars. "We're going to break some hearts," Bird admitted. Johnston added that when you hire people like Brown, Jones and Fishback, their hearts go out to every kid. "It's going to be hard," he said.

Students will be selected for the program in part through a relationship-based referral process, Bird said. In addition to the schools, organizations like the Urban League, the Boys and Girls Club and others will help refer students to the Bright Futures Foundation's Avenue Scholars program. Students who are not selected, he said, may be referred to other programs. Additionally, the students selected as Avenue Scholars are first-generation college students, have financial need, demonstrate limited high school success and have a resiliency that will help them overcome barriers. Gallup, Inc. provides assistance in selecting resilient students.

The Bright Futures Avenue Scholars program is unique because it offers the intrusive support, the safety-net approach throughout the student's college career. Similar programs nationwide help students get into college, but don't offer the often-needed support during college.

"We're there to help you every step of the way," Jones said, whether it's financial, family, social, emotional or other issues that could impede success. "But we worry about those things. Students concentrate on getting the work done, and we'll take care of the rest," she added.

Collaboration with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Trina Creighton, a faculty member in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Journalism and Mass Communications (COJMC), produced a 30-minute documentary in 2008 called *The Academic Achievement Gap: You Do Better When You Know Better*, about the achievement gap between black children and white children in Omaha. Creighton's documentary, produced as part of her master's thesis, has helped to publicize the issue. Creighton, who begins work on her Ph.D. this fall, has been asked to work as a consultant with Bright Futures Foundation and will complete research projects for them. The COJMC collaborates with Bright Futures Foundation's Avenue Scholars program to support the project's students. ●

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