

Carrying a Torch for Kids Who Dream of College

By Matt Hart

In 2001, two third-grade girls from Northfield had a dream.

They would go to college together and be roommates. There was only one problem: Stephanie was a blond-haired, blue-eyed Midwesterner, and Alejandra was Hispanic. Back in 2001, only 18% of Northfield's Latino population passed the Minnesota Basic Skills Test (BST), a requirement to graduate from high school.

The odds of the girls' dream being realized looked grim.

That's not the case anymore though, thanks to the efforts of TORCH, a nonprofit program designed to improve the high school graduation and college enrollment rates of Latino, ESL, and any other would-be first-generation college students in Northfield.

The name stands for "Tacking Obstacles and Raising College Hopes."

"Students see kids that look like them and are like them making it," said Beth Berry, coordinator of TORCH at Northfield High School and one of the program's founders. "And they say, 'I know her, I know her.'"

Constant Presence

Today, over 150 Northfield students between grades six and 12 participate in TORCH. The program offers services ranging from one-on-one mentoring and tutoring to ACT test prep, to college visits and application help. In the past two years, nearly 90% of seniors taking part in TORCH have graduated from high school and reported that they want to go to college.

Overseeing it all is Berry, who has been the program's director since it began.

"She is deeply, deeply committed," said Adrienne Falcon, Coordinator of Academic Civic Engagement at Carleton College, who has collaborated with Berry and TORCH on many occasions. "She's this constant presence with [the students], saying 'what are you doing, where are you going?' She knows all these kids."

The program's efforts begin in middle school, where the focus is on connecting students to after-school and summer programs. Once the students reach high school, college and career planning become the TORCH program's main goals.

The program often works with groups in the area. Recently, students from Carleton's Engineers Without Borders Club have been reaching out to TORCH participants, "interesting them in science as a way of interesting them in college," said Falcon.

'If' to 'When'

Carleton's Interfaith Social Action Group (IFSA) has partnered extensively with Berry, including a recent session where IFSA members sat down with several TORCH seniors who were thinking about applying to North Dakota State University.

“They printed out the applications and brought them with them. Within an hour they were halfway done with the application,” said Falcon. “It's really neat to see that happening.”

This year, 32 Northfield High School seniors participate in the program, compared to 16 last year. Last year more Latino students left Northfield for college than in the five years combined before the TORCH program began.

Right now, five TORCH students are taking online college classes supplemented with weekly discussion, and 20 have gone to summer programs. Berry describes this as “huge,” because “they change the mindset from 'if' to 'when.'”

Making the jump between desire and reality is not easy though, largely because many TORCH participants are immigrants without legal documentation. Although ten states have passed the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, which provides undocumented high school students the chance to gain permanent residency, Minnesota is not one of them.

Veto Threat

As a result, an immigrant graduate of a Minnesota high school who does not have legal documentation still must pay out-of-state tuition to all but two Minnesota state universities, Morris and Marshall. Some schools “absolutely won't admit illegals” at all, said Berry. In fact, Gov. Tim Pawlenty has gone so far as to say that he would veto an entire Education Bill if it included the DREAM Act.

As a result, the path to college for many TORCH participants is a long one. Berry encourages her students to take advantage of the Minnesota Post Secondary Enrollment Option (PSEO), which pays for the tuition and textbooks of high schoolers who enroll in classes at a public college or university during their junior or senior years.

“It won't be a straight shot,” said Berry. “But if they have a year under their belts, they're much more likely to make it in the long run.”

Berry is hopeful, though, for the future of both her students and undocumented high-schoolers nationwide. “Obama has been very supportive of ‘paths to citizenship,’” she pointed out, adding that 70% of Americans say such “paths” should be open to immigrants living in the U.S. without proper legal documentation.

Yet, raids on illegal immigrants continue to take place to this day. In Northfield, Berry knows that raids have occurred in the past two months.

Supporting Kids

“Several years ago, we had 135 students absent from school one day,” Berry recalled. Word had spread of a raid, and hundreds of Latinos had scattered from Northfield.

Things have changed a bit since that day, though. “Today, they're more only trying to target the

troublemakers,” said Berry.

Attitudes have not shifted entirely, however.

“Ninety percent of letters to congressmen are anti-immigration,” Berry reported. Furthermore, she has encountered “lots of naivete” about the issue. One friend of hers asked, “You’re not supporting illegals are you?” Berry, who does not know which of her students are documented or not, replied, “What difference does it make? They’re kids. I’m supporting kids.”

Illegal immigration is not the only obstacle TORCH must tackle, either. The program is funded entirely by two grants, one from the Minnesota Department of Higher Education's Intervention for College Attendance Program and the other the Minnesota Department of Public Safety's Title II Justice and Community Grant.

Both grants must be reapplied for every two years, and this year they will both run out within the space of six months.

“We may be in trouble coming up,” said Berry.

Ever-Shifting Puzzle

The program will need money for their summer programs, and they can never be sure that both grants will be renewed. Without even one of them, TORCH would be unable to function in nearly the same way.

Here, Berry places her trust in Zach Pruitt, a Carleton graduate and the Director of Northfield's Healthy Community Initiative. Pruitt writes the grants when TORCH must reapply for them, and “should get a lot of recognition,” said Berry.

While the program has seen success with just the two grants, Berry keeps looking for more money to allow the program to expand. The greatest expenses are for personnel and transportation. Recently TORCH has been covering the cost of the school buses that take students home after its after-school programs.

This summer, Berry also hired Susan Sanderson for the position of Middle School Coordinator, and since the last renewal of the two grants she has been able to hire educational assistants to help with tutoring and mentoring. Several of her high school students also serve as fellows, offering help to disadvantaged elementary and middle school students, for which they receive a \$500 scholarship.

Still, the program relies heavily on the work of volunteers, including many students from Carleton and St. Olaf. “It becomes an ever-shifting puzzle,” said Berry. “Eventually we’re no longer going to have the funds.”

Few and Far

The idea to create a program helping Northfield Latinos to succeed in the classroom began in 2001 with Stephanie and Alejandra, those two girls who dreamed of becoming college roommates.

After hearing the girls' plan, Berry, who was working as an elementary guidance counselor at the time,

and a few teachers were moved to action. “We knew we had to do something,” Berry said.

The result was the creation of a group called *Familias en Acción* (Families in Action). They received a small grant of \$1,900 from the school system and began by taking Latino students and their families bowling, trying to build a community.

Soon, the group organized for the Panamanian Dean of Students from St. Olaf to come and address Northfield Latino parents in Spanish about the importance of higher education in America. One hundred seventy five people attended the event.

In the following years, *Familias en Acción* continued to hold events for students and their families. The success stories were few and far between, though, leading to a forum held in 2004 to discuss the program's future.

Measurable Success

It was here that TORCH was born. Realizing the need for more direct involvement in the lives of Latin students, teachers, social workers, and the school's Latino liaison met and decided to create a new program. They applied for and received a Department of Higher Education grant. One of the teachers came up with the acronym TORCH, and Berry devoted herself full-time as the program's director.

Although the program began serving only Latino students, many of whom were enrolled in ESL classes – “it was real identifiable,” said Berry – they expanded in 2006, as the result of greater funding, to include “any disadvantaged student.” Still, the vast majority of TORCH students are Hispanic, as Berry said that in the white population, “the pride thing gets in the way.”

The success has been measurable along the way.

Since the program began in 2004, it has sent five students to four-year colleges. Many more have attended two-year schools, taken online classes, or participated in summer programs. Berry summed up the progress made when she said, “we've become much more direct in our approaches to things.”

Despite its considerable successes, TORCH is continuously looking to do more. The achievement gap between white and Hispanic students remains large, and Berry still describes the program's work as “doing it by the seat of our pants. We never know what the next day brings.”

Berry has often tried to collaborate with similar programs based in the Twin Cities, such as Admission Possible, the Minnesota Minority Education Project (MMEP), and Minnesota College Access, but Northfield's distance from Minneapolis and St. Paul has made collaboration mostly futile.

Up to Funders

Berry described her attempts to connect with The Power of You, a community college program out of the Twin Cities. “I keep calling, asking when they're going to expand,” she said. “But they say, ‘it's up to the funders.’”

This is a major hurdle for the program. Berry sees students such as a varsity soccer player, whom she described as “a community leader,” yet is unable to receive scholarships because he is from Northfield, not Minneapolis or St. Paul.

Similarly, though Berry said that people in town have noticed TORCH's efforts, the recognition received by the group has mostly remained at the local level.

More than anything, the greatest day-to-day challenge facing Berry and her program is connecting with students and their families. She is still often blown off by students and knows that of those who do participate, "some of them aren't going to use it."

Gaining the trust of parents is also difficult, and complicated by the fact that neither Berry nor Sanderson speaks Spanish and must be accompanied by a translator on home visits. Two years ago, a TORCH graduate was preparing to leave for the University of Wisconsin at River Falls when his mother talked to someone in their trailer community who convinced her that her son should not be going there.

One-on-One

The student never left, and is now attending community college.

"It's all about relationships," Berry said, "and figuring things out one-on-one. It's slow, but it works."

Indeed, TORCH has certainly come a long way from the day when Stephanie and Alejandra decided to become college roommates. Currently sophomores in high school, their dream is still alive. Although Stephanie has moved out of state, the two remain in touch.

Alejandra was recently chosen as a representative to a state-wide youth advisory council. According to Berry, "she is definitely planning on attending college" and "has the academics to do so."

"My dream would be that we get some kids who've graduated to come back and be teachers," Berry said.

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