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More Than Bootstraps, a New Jersey Non-Profit, Prepares First-Generation College Students to Help Younger Peers in Passaic

PASSAIC, New Jersey – *September 1, 2020* – More Than Bootstraps (MTB) has partnered with the Passaic Public Schools to help first-generation, low-income students access and succeed in higher education. On August 21, 2020, the initial cohort of five college student leaders graduated from the MTB summer training program. Over the first three weeks of August, the leaders participated in daily on-line sessions with guest speakers and experts on imposter syndrome, first-generation resilience, microaggressions, the hidden curriculum of college, mentoring strategies, college admissions, financial aid, and more.

Speakers at the online graduation ceremony held on August 21, 2020 included **Jeannette Torres-Gomez**, the Principal of Passaic High School, and **Christina Schratz**, the President of the Passaic Board of Education. **Richard J. Helldobler**, the President of William Paterson University, reminded everyone that

“The only difference between a college freshman and a high school senior is three months, or summer vacation. This is true for all new students, but especially so for first-generation students who do not have that support system at home of parents who have gone to college to help them figure out systems that by in large weren’t necessarily designed for them.”

The **Honorable Hector Lora**, the Mayor of the City of Passaic, praised the student leaders for giving back to their community and stated that he believes that peer to peer mentorship is the most effective way to encourage other individuals to reach for higher levels of success. Quoting Audrey Hepburn, the Mayor noted that “Nothing is impossible, the word itself says 'I'm possible'!”

More Than Bootstraps recruited the first class of leaders after conducting interviews with several recent graduates of Passaic High School. The leaders will help guide and mentor fifteen Passaic High School students and their families during the 2020-2021 academic year. The five graduates of the training program are:

Michelle Contreras, a junior at William Paterson University majoring in Exercise Science and minoring in Health Studies. In high school, Michelle was involved in several extracurricular activities, served as captain of the track and cross-country team and a leader in the Peer Leadership program mentoring underclassmen at Passaic High School.

Rogreka Clayton, a junior in the Athletic Training program at William Paterson University. She received numerous awards and recognition for her volleyball during high school, including First Team All-County and Athlete of the Year at Passaic High School. Recruited to play volleyball for William Paterson University, Rogreka followed that passion and managed to juggle her responsibilities as a full-time student and full-time athlete.

Jocelyn Gonzalez, a junior at The College of New Jersey majoring in Early Childhood Special Education and Mathematics. She expects to graduate in 2022 with a Bachelor of Science and in 2023 with a Master's degree in Special Education. At Passaic High School, Jocelyn served as a mentor to freshman class and worked as an assistant teacher in an inclusive classroom.

Johana Lastor-Montes completed her AA degree at Essex Community College and is now a third-year student at Rutgers University with a Psychology major and Business Administration minor. She has served as President and co-founder of the diversity club at Passaic High School and a teacher assistant for Psychology courses on a university level.

Dhruvi Rana, a junior at Wesleyan University majoring in environmental economics on the pre-med track. Dhruvi was the valedictorian of the Passaic High School Class of 2018.

““Our first cohort of leaders is an outstanding group of diverse, engaged young women, ready and willing to take on this important work,” said **Audrey Fisch**, president of More Than Bootstraps.

ABOUT MORE THAN BOOTSTRAPS

[More Than Bootstraps](#) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping first-generation students access and succeed in higher education. We employ a near-peer mentoring model to create a community of success. College students from within the community return to their high school to guide their younger peers through the college search, application, and assimilation process. These leaders, working as a mentoring cohort, in turn strengthen their own college-going identities and improve their own chances of success in higher education.

More Than Bootstraps is a 501(c)3 organization, Tax ID 83-2245008.

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