

Nonprofit Profile: More Than Bootstraps helping first-generation college students overcome roadblocks

From our print edition

By ROI-NJ Staff(Westfield) - January 11, 2021



Masked up college leader Rogreka Clayton delivering UNINJA laptops to high school fellows Ashley Delgado - *Rogreka Clayton*

In brief

Location: 421 Highland Ave., Westfield

Serving: First-generation Passaic public school students and Passaic public school graduates currently enrolled in higher education.

Key members: Founder Audrey Fisch, Vice President Irma Maini, Treasurer Jim Taylor and Secretary Claudia Severino.

Origin

[More Than Bootstraps](#) is a new nonprofit founded by educators who understand the significant obstacles that first-generation college students face on their journey into and through higher education. To succeed, they need More Than Bootstraps.

Mission

At More Than Bootstraps, we're working to achieve a world in which every young person has access to and support for success in higher education. Our mission is to help first-generation college students, the majority of whom are students of color from low-income communities, to not only gain access to higher education, but to achieve success throughout their education journey. We do this by providing critical support services and ensuring that students become active members of the More Than Bootstraps community.



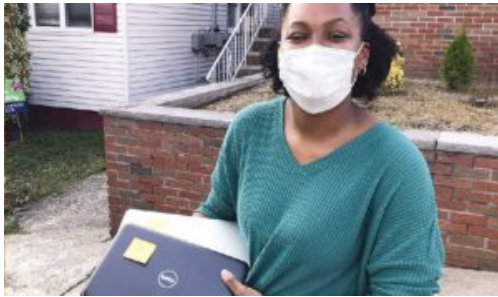
Rogreka Clayton, left, delivers a UNINJA laptop to high school fellow Jennifer Angel.

Goals

Our primary goal is to expand our services in Passaic. We will follow and continue to support our current High School Fellows through their senior year of high school and as they enter post-secondary education and become Leader Fellows. In the meantime, as our program gains credibility and exposure in the community, we will increase the number of High School Fellows.

Programs

The More Than Bootstraps strategy for creating a scalable community of success is based on three components: near-peer mentorship; stipend support for program participants; and parent engagement.



Rogreka Clayton

Mentoring: 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 cohort, in turn strengthen their own college-going identities and improve their own chances of success in higher education.

Financial assistance: First-generation high school and college students often have limited resources and significant financial and family responsibilities. A stipend allows these students the time needed to come together as a community.

Outreach to families: More Than Bootstraps is a resource for family members and guardians. We help families understand the demands and potential benefits of higher education so they can support the college-going success of the students in MTB.

Achievements

We began operations in summer 2020, recruiting and selecting our first class of five Leader Fellows, graduates of Passaic High School and current college students. We wrote the curriculum for and ran a three-week summer training program, with guest speakers from across the nation on topics varying from imposter syndrome to the needs of undocumented students to financial aid. We initiated partnerships with the Rutgers University graduate social program to host three interns to support of program participants and families and with UNINJA to supply laptops for all program participants. We selected six High School Fellows and initiated programming for fall 2020.

Fundraising

More Than Bootstraps offers a diverse set of donation opportunities throughout the year. We accept one-time and recurring donations from our individual supporters in the state and local community, as well as from members of the broader higher education community who recognize the barriers first-generation students face. We also provide sponsorship opportunities for area businesses and as well as secure grants through individual, community and corporate foundations. All the funds we raise go towards funding student stipends. The volunteer board of MTB is covering all administrative costs for the program.

Benefactors

The KearnyBank Foundation has been an early and significant supporter.

Finally

Here's a story that explains the motivation behind and vision of More Than Bootstraps:

Julio (not his real name) is a 1st-generation college student. After the first day of class, he is nervous, but excited. But, four weeks later, he is thinking about dropping out. His aunt is ill and expected to die. He lost one of his jobs to the pandemic and does not make enough at his other job to make ends meet.

With whom can he discuss his worries? No one.

Julio likes to handle problems himself. He imagines that it is his responsibility to “pull himself up by his bootstraps.” Perhaps his mother, peers and faculty would like to be a village of support, but he imagines he needs to do it alone.

If Julio were part of a community of peers, people who went to his high school, whose families struggled economically and who had made their way to college; if he were given a stipend to allow him time to mentor his younger peers, Julio would not counsel them to go it alone, nor would he drop out himself. Julio would recognize that it takes more than bootstraps to succeed. Julio would help his peers succeed, and he would do so himself.

Conversation Starter

For more information, contact Audrey Fisch at audrey@morethanbootstraps.org or 908-397-0893.

<https://www.roi-nj.com/2021/01/11/education/nonprofit-profile-more-than-bootstraps-helping-first-generation-college-students-overcome-roadblocks/>