

Westfield Woman's Nonprofit Boosting First-Generation College Students

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Giving Back

By JILL REED SIROTY

December 27, 2020 at 10:45 AM



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WESTFIELD, NJ — A Westfield resident has launched a nonprofit that provides mentoring and support to students who are the first in their families to attend college.

Audrey Fisch, an English professor at New Jersey City University, posits that the non-academic obstacles to student success — which have long been a barrier for first generation college students — have become even more challenging over time, something she is working to counter.

Over the summer, More Than Bootstraps began its programming with six juniors at Passaic High School and a panel of near-peer mentors, all of whom are recent Passaic High School graduates attending college.

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Much of the programming that was planned to be conducted in-person had to be shifted online due to COVID-19, but Fisch said that this allowed them to involve mentors and guest speakers from a distance, something they plan to continue going forward.

“We were interested in serving a Latinx community,” said Fisch of the choice to begin with students from Passaic High School, where 94% of students identify as Hispanic. “While education is important to this demographic, there are families with different priorities, and students are often expected to stay home and commute. They are also often loan-averse, and some may have immigration and language issues as well.”

Fisch discussed future plans for the organization.

“Long-term, we think More Than Bootstraps is a low-cost, sustainable intervention in the world of college-access programs and an intervention that is scalable,” she said. “In other words, we would love to bring the model to other communities where first-generation students are the norm and college access and success are hurdles.”

More Than Bootstraps does not recruit high-achieving students as some other programs do. Students need only be interested in pursuing some form of higher education.

Fisch has recruited an eight-member board of directors with whom she has worked in developing programming curriculum. This fall, students were charged with interviewing Passaic High School alumni, including high-achieving professionals like New Jersey Supreme Court Chief Justice Stuart Rabner, who was raised in Passaic.

Students reached out by email, conducted an interview and presented information to their peers in a presentation, developing professional communication skills that are often expected of college students.

“It was wonderful for the students to see that people from Passaic had made it so far. It’s a big leap of faith for them to step out of their comfort zone and discover this stranger is happy to talk to them,” Fisch said. “They find out they have things in common, and that people are happy to help them. And it helps them imagine themselves in a successful future.”

More Than Bootstraps also encourages the development of relationships and bonding between the high school students and their college mentors.

“We’ve had comments from our college leaders about how they are sustained through this program,” Fisch said. “Having a younger person looking up to them provides them with an outlet to talk to about their own struggles.”

More Than Bootstraps continues to seek volunteers as well as financial donations to support the stipend provided to students for their participation in the program.

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