



College Bound Opportunities program helps those in need

By [STEPHANIE KOHL](#)

Twenty recent high school graduates smiled brightly as they shared their name and what college they would attend in the fall before collecting their new laptops and printers on Sunday.

The students are part of College Bound Opportunities, a non-profit organization that provides students in Township High School District 113 who have academic potential and financial need the opportunity to earn college degrees, pursue careers of choice and productively serve in their local communities. The organization matches students, who are chosen through an application and interview process in January of the students' junior year, with community volunteers who serve as mentors to the students through the college application process, and support and encourage them through their college career. Mentors help the students and their families through the application process, financial aid forms, college tours and teach them how to advocate for themselves while away at school, among other activities.

The program, started about five years ago, currently has 67 students and more than 70 mentors, with an active waiting list for mentor opportunities, said executive director Susan Bell last week.

While this year there were 20 high school graduates in the program and another 13 who will graduate high school next year, previous years ranged from 8 to 10 students. The first class of CBO students will enter their senior year of college in the fall and all of those in CBO are on track for graduation. "We would like to take more students," Bell said of a goal for the future.



Anna Aguilar, a senior at University of Illinois, speaks about her experience with College Bound Opportunities during Sunday's celebration at the Heller Nature Center in Highland Park.

Individual donors

CBO operates entirely on donations with more than 85 percent of its funding from individual donors. All mentors volunteer their time. In addition to providing laptop computers and a myriad of other help, CBO also offers its students up to a \$4,000 scholarship for each year of college.

Anna Aguilar is a member of CBO's first class. She will be a senior at University of Illinois in the fall and is studying political science and Italian. She said that CBO was, and still is, a tremendous help to her college experience.

"My coach really helped me because I'm a first generation (college student), so I had no idea how to go about the college process," she said last week.

Her coach, Bonnie Shlensky, worked with not only Aguilar, but with her family also to help everyone with the transition. In addition to CBO's help with the college process, the organization helped Aguilar find a job for the summer after she graduated high school and

helped her get an internship working in the field she'd eventually like to become part of.

"My goal is to go to law school," she said.

Aguilar said that while she always knew she would become a college student, CBO has helped guide her through the process and has pushed her in the right direction. Before CBO, she had a fear of going into college alone, but her mentor eased that as Aguilar knew she would always have someone in her corner.

"I think the most important thing would be the support system," Aguilar said of CBO's biggest help.

Aguilar is on track to graduate in Spring 2011 and plans to move right into law school in fall 2011.

Shlensky said last week that she has loved every minute of being a volunteer. During the organization's first year, she was part of the team that interviewed and selected students and that was all it took for her to fall in love with the kids.

'Gained confidence'

"I'm somewhere between a friend and parent," she said. ". . . Our kids have gained the confidence and self-esteem that they can (do it)."

While mentors guide students through college applications, financial aid and scholarship packets, once the student enters college, the relationship does not stop. Shlensky said mentors and students communicate often, anywhere from weekly to monthly depending on the student's needs.

"I don't want to only hear from you when there's a problem," Shlensky said she tells her kids, adding it is important for the student to contact their mentor as soon as possible if an issue arises. Discussions range from roommate issues, to scheduling questions to budgeting to landing summer jobs and internships.

"I believe in them learning how to advocate for themselves and teaching them how to do it," Shlensky said.

Sunday's celebration included tips from CBO on staying on track during college, like going to class and getting to know professors and

advisors, and personal advice from one of their peers. Aguilar shared some of her college experiences and knowledge with the group.

Martha Roman, a member of CBO, recently graduated from Highland Park High School and will attend Stanford in the fall. She said Sunday the biggest help CBO has provided has been her own personal coach, who informed her of, and helped her apply for, the Quest Bridge scholarship, which covers most of her expenses at the Ivy League school where she will study biomedical engineering and psychology.

The first generation college student was comfortable enough to discuss any college-related issues with her coach and is appreciative of the support they offered her family as well.

"I think CBO better prepared me to adjust to (college)," she said.

Best friends Jon Gonzalez, heading off to University of Illinois to study mechanical engineering, and Stefano Rosenberg, heading off to University of Iowa to study astronomy and physics, both graduates of Highland Park High School, said Sunday the services CBO has provided go way beyond what they expected. Both were humbled by the top of the line laptops and printers they were given and said that every time they turned around, CBO was helping them or giving them something to help them succeed.

Gonzalez said he was wanted to attend U of I for as long as he can remember and without CBO he "wouldn't have been as confident" about the college process, interviews and so forth.

Rosenberg added that CBO helped give him the push he needed to apply for more scholarships and helped him get into the college mindset.

For as much as students say they get out of the relationship with CBO, mentors said they get just as much, if not more.

"It truly is the most rewarding thing I think I've ever been involved in," Shlensky said, adding it is a comforting feeling to know that the help she and the CBO organization offers makes such a difference in the students' lives.

For more information, or to make a donation to CBO, log on to www.cbo4edu.org.