

Lessons

**When networks
build a platform,
students step up**



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Design: IronGate Creative Printing: Mossberg & Company, Inc.

On the cover: Vincent Evans, 20, a senior at Florida A&M University, has his mind set on a career in politics, in part because of his involvement with the student advocacy group ENLACE Florida.

Networks can multiply the power of change

If you're at all familiar with Lumina Foundation for Education, you know that we are committed to a specific national goal for college success. Our "Big Goal" is this: By 2025, we want 60 percent of Americans to hold high-quality postsecondary degrees or credentials.

Also, if you have any knowledge of current college-completion rates, you can see that our Big Goal is aptly named. Today, only about 40 percent of Americans have at least a two-year degree — a percentage that has been essentially unchanged for nearly half a century. We understand that it will be a huge challenge for the nation to reach a 60 percent completion rate in the next 15 years.

Still, my Lumina colleagues and I are confident the Big Goal can be reached, in part because we have seen the tremendous potential of collaborative action. When organizations and individuals work in productive partnership — that is, when they establish and maintain effective networks — imposing barriers can be overcome and ambitious goals achieved.

For us, the term "network" has particular meaning. In fact, largely as a result of our work in a national college awareness and action campaign called KnowHow2GO, we have come to define networks in a specific way — and we ask our KnowHow2GO grantees and partners to form networks that fit that definition.

For us, a strong and sustainable network for increasing college access and success must be built on five dimensions:

1. An infrastructure that enables members to identify and achieve a shared purpose.
2. Service system cohesion, improvement and sustainability.
3. Data-based decision making about priorities, policies and practices.
4. Expertise in college access and success issues and advocacy for supportive public policies.
5. Creation and dissemination of knowledge within the network and beyond.

Already, such networks are leading the KnowHow2GO effort in 16 states. We're also working hard to establish networks in additional states by bringing together community-based pre-college advising programs; local education funds; colleges and universities; and existing programs such as TRIO, GEAR-UP and other university-based efforts.

Of course, the KnowHow2GO campaign isn't the only example of networks in action. In fact, the principles of effective networks — principles articulated eloquently by Paul Vandeventer, president and CEO of Community Partners, in his book *Networks that Work* — are being embraced by any number of Lumina grantees and partner organizations.

This issue of *Lumina Foundation Lessons* magazine highlights three such organizations, all of which are working tirelessly to promote college success among low-income and minority students.

In this issue of *Lessons*, you'll learn about the LIFETIME program, which assists welfare mothers in their quest for college attainment in California. You'll read about the Providence, R.I.-based organization What Kids Can Do, which empowers students to tell their own stories as a means of boosting postsecondary success. Finally, in Florida, you'll meet the organizers — and especially the students — who are involved in the policy-advocacy group ENLACE.

We at Lumina are proud to support these organizations and to share the lessons they have learned. After all, dissemination of knowledge is one of the hallmarks of any successful network, and we certainly want *our* network — the one dedicated to achieving the Big Goal — to succeed.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. P. Merisotis". The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a white background.

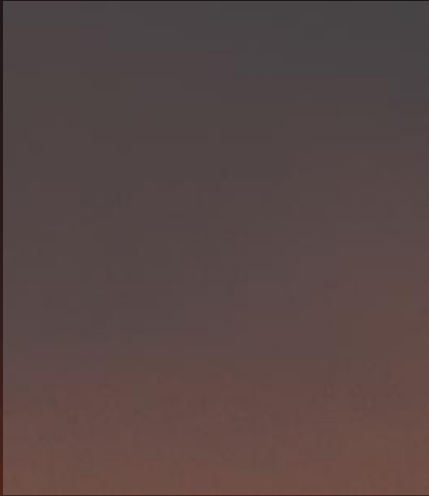
Jamie P. Merisotis
President and CEO
Lumina Foundation for Education

LESSONS

Lumina Foundation Lessons is an occasional publication in which we share the results of our grantees' work. By thoughtfully assessing the programs and organizations we fund and then sharing what we learn from those efforts, we hope to broaden and deepen the impact of Lumina's grant making. Also, we hope publications such as this can help boost the effectiveness of the organizations and individuals who do the

front-line work of increasing college access and success. That work is vital as we seek to achieve our Big Goal: that, by 2025, 60 percent of Americans will hold high-quality postsecondary degrees and credentials.





California's LIFETIME program

A spark of activism ignites huge changes for welfare-to-work moms

Diana Spatz's motto for living is simple: You have to dream big. Spatz knows firsthand the power of her affirmation. She's been dreaming big and thinking outside the box for most of her life. Her story begins in 1986, when Spatz — pregnant, homeless and suffering from depression — found the courage to break free from an abusive relationship. To survive, she relied on public assistance and took a minimum-wage job cleaning houses for \$4.75 an hour.

Spatz, now 48, says the birth of her daughter inspired her to build a better future. Armed with a newfound sense of purpose, she set her sights on college.

That enthusiasm was almost derailed, however, when the county welfare department sanctioned Spatz, essentially labeling her as a welfare cheat. She later learned that her caseworker had mistakenly counted a Pell grant as part of her income.

"Even though I was getting help through Expanded Opportunity Program and Services, the Latino Service Center and the Re-entry Program, no one seemed to know how the welfare rules applied to higher education. I was pretty much left on my own to figure it out," Spatz says.

A legal aid attorney helped Spatz win her appeal, getting her welfare benefits reinstated. But the experience left Spatz frustrated.

"I was close to quitting school. The intersection of these two systems — higher education and welfare — didn't work. Welfare mothers didn't have the information, connections or resources they needed," Spatz says.

Grassroots beginning

Spatz set out to help low-income single mothers overcome the procedural hurdles barring the way to higher education. She began organizing in the Oakland area and on college campuses, creating fliers and holding workshops to inform parents about their education rights under welfare laws. It was after she received a scholarship to the University of California-Berkeley — where she graduated with honors — that LIFETIME was officially born.

In 1996, LIFETIME (Low-Income Families' Empowerment through Education) was a fledgling organization that Spatz ran out of her home. "Employees" consisted of five single mothers who had completed college while on welfare and who now volunteered their time to help others do the same.

Despite its small staff, LIFETIME had lofty goals: To equip thousands of low-income parents with information and access to social networks so that they could enter and complete college and escape poverty for good.

With a service learning class she developed at UC-Berkeley as a model, Spatz started training low-income parent-students on welfare laws and policy-

making. The goal was to build a local and state network of parent advocates — people who could speak out on welfare reform, provide personal testimony to government officials and, most important, become empowered to serve as community leaders.

"If you want to know what a poor family needs, ask them. Parents need to be at the table when policies about their future are created," Spatz says. "LIFETIME came together because a group of welfare mothers were forced to fight the system to become educated. We got a second chance, and we want to make sure others get their second chance as well."

Today, Spatz is a widely respected advocate on welfare reform and poverty.

"I was close to quitting school. The intersection of these two systems—higher education and welfare—didn't work."

*Diana Spatz,
LIFETIME (Low-Income Families'
Empowerment through Education)*

LIFETIME has grown from a grassroots organization into a movement of parent-student advocates who work to help welfare mothers share the message that higher education is their path to economic freedom.

Every year, more than 2,000 parents benefit directly from LIFETIME's services. The group provides financial aid counseling, peer mentoring, workshops, a speakers' bureau, and a Student Parent Action Network (SPAN) that engages low-income parents and their children in policy education and community organizing.

LIFETIME also maintains a statewide Parent Leadership Committee, which involves welfare parents in policy

discussions concerning the reauthorization of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and its implementation in California. Since 2001, more than 400 student-parents — individuals who attend college while receiving benefits from the California Work Opportunities and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program — have joined the committee.

In addition to awareness and outreach efforts, the group has testified at numerous Congressional briefings, state hearings, and state and national conferences on issues of welfare reform, family poverty and education.

LIFETIME's motivation to train welfare mothers as policy advocates is rooted in the overhaul of the welfare system under President Bill Clinton. The Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) Act was replaced by the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). As part of PRWORA, Congress created the TANF block grant program.

New welfare rules

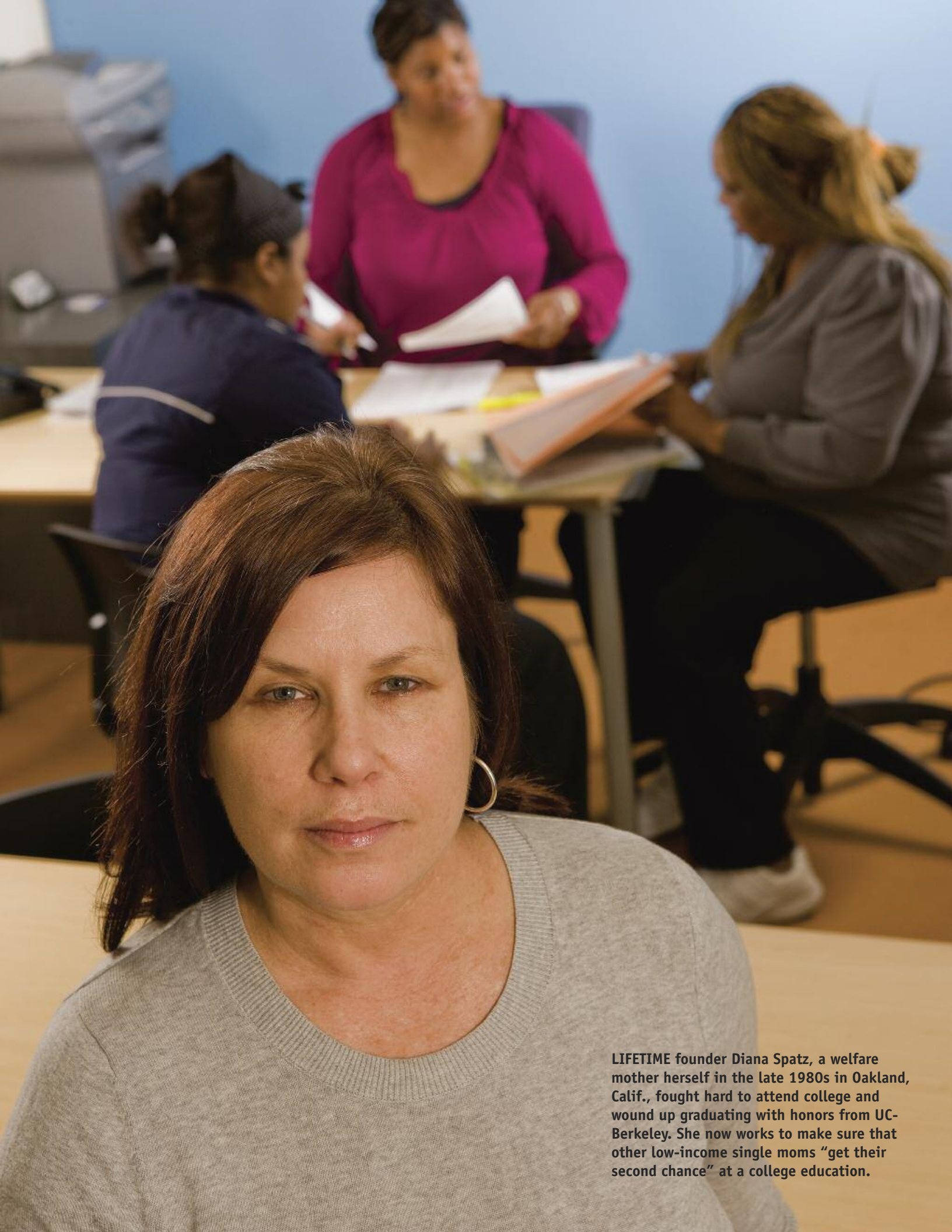
TANF created several new rules for welfare, including:

- Mandatory work requirements.
- A 60-month federal lifetime limit on benefits, education and training programs.
- An emphasis on quickly moving from welfare to work.
- Limitations on participation in higher education.

Critics of TANF say the program has created more barriers than opportunities for recipients, especially with regard to college access and success. As originally implemented in 1997, TANF required 20 hours of work participation per week. By 2002, the required number of hours had increased to 35. Postsecondary education was not specifically listed as an allowable work activity. It was up to the states to determine the kinds of educational opportunities available to welfare participants. Spatz says most states allowed less than one year of postsecondary education before cutting benefits.

TANF had an immediate chilling effect on college participation among

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LIFETIME founder Diana Spatz, a welfare mother herself in the late 1980s in Oakland, Calif., fought hard to attend college and wound up graduating with honors from UC-Berkeley. She now works to make sure that other low-income single moms “get their second chance” at a college education.

welfare recipients. According to a Center for Law and Social Policy study, *State Opportunities to Provide Access to Postsecondary Education under TANF*, the number of AFDC/TANF families reporting participation in postsecondary education or training fell from 172,176 in 1996 to 58,055 in 1998. Studies in several states reflected similar findings. Enrollment of welfare recipients at the City University of New York dropped by 77 percent — from 22,000 in 1996 to 5,000 in 2000. And in Massachusetts, welfare recipients' enrollment in the state's 15 community colleges dropped by an average of 46 percent between 1995 and 1997, according to a 2002 study by the Center for Women Policy Studies.

Education and training are instrumental in improving individuals' economic circumstances, particularly among low-income populations. Many welfare recipients say TANF's work requirements make it difficult to balance work, child care and school. Requirements vary by state, and some states have stiffer requirements than others. In California, CalWORKs requires 32 hours of weekly work or participation in "welfare to work" activities for single parents and 35 hours for two-parent families.

TANF is a federal program, but states are responsible for designing their TANF programs and determining income eligibility and benefit levels. While some states enacted model legislation and programs to promote access to higher education and other education supports, most did not. Even today, many states limit postsecondary education as an allowable work activity for welfare recipients.

Spatz argues that TANF should do much more to invest in poor families. Among her suggestions:

- Temporarily stop the 60-month federal lifetime limit on welfare payments for college-bound recipients.
- Strengthen the focus on outcomes, such as education and career-path employment.
- Allow greater flexibility for countable work activities.
- Provide additional subsidies for child care and textbooks.

Once 'out of options,' ex-welfare mother is now giving back

Giving up is not an option for Dawn Love — even though she's had plenty of reasons to do just that. Love became a single parent in 2000, after the father of her daughter was jailed. With rent due and the bills piling up, Love says she did what she had to do: She turned to welfare.

"I was out of options," Love explains. "I had a child to clothe and feed and bills to pay."

"There are a lot of misperceptions about welfare," says Love, now 37. "People look at you and say you're lazy, just collecting a check from the government. But every story is a different situation."

Love had just enrolled in Chabot College, seeking the skills she needed to make a better life for herself and her daughter. She now feared those plans were in jeopardy. Her welfare caseworker

couldn't — or wouldn't — help, Love says. She then learned about a workshop that LIFETIME was conducting at a nearby CalWORKs office.

Love attended the meeting, which she now calls a "transformative moment" in her life.

"My caseworker wasn't helping, and I didn't know where to turn. LIFETIME showed me how to navigate

the (welfare) system and get my questions answered," says Love.

Grateful for the help she got from LIFETIME, Love became an intern for the organization in 2001 and later a peer advocate. Among her responsibilities, Love works with low-income parents to educate them about welfare rules that allow them to pursue postsecondary education and training as a welfare-to-work activity.

"It's sad, but some caseworkers simply don't care," she says.

"Their message is: 'You shouldn't go to school; you need to go to work.' In other instances, parents don't know the right questions to ask about higher education," Love says.

Love reached her own higher education milestone in 2009, when she earned an associate's degree in human services. Next year, she plans to begin her bachelor's degree in human development.

Love is no longer on welfare. In addition to conducting workshops for California community colleges and local organizations, she provides one-on-one mentoring to welfare parents. The work is both informational and inspirational, and it's become her "passion," she says.

"In my own life, I've come full circle. I have a learning disability, and there were many, many times I wanted to give up. But I didn't. LIFETIME put me on the path to college. Today, I am paying it forward," Love says.

"There are a lot of misperceptions about welfare...but every story is a different situation."

LIFETIME peer advocate Dawn Love



Dawn Love, a former welfare mom in Oakland, Calif., says her life has “come full circle.” In her work with LIFETIME, she now serves as a peer advocate, helping low-income parents pursue postsecondary training as a welfare-to-work activity.



Former welfare mom Melissa Johnson and daughter Brooklyn shared an important moment in 2008, when Johnson accepted her nursing degree from Woodland Community College. “It was important that my daughter was there,” Johnson recalls. “She’s the reason for my determination.”

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- Create partnerships between higher education and advocacy groups to inform welfare recipients about how to take advantage of postsecondary opportunities.
“We believe that higher education should be a priority and a requirement

for every state,” says Spatz. “Not an option, but a requirement.”

In 1997, LIFETIME took that message to Sacramento, where the California Legislature was developing its TANF/CalWORKs program. The meeting did not go well, Spatz recalls.

“We were told that the issue of counting education as a welfare-to-work activity was dead, that we were too articulate to be welfare moms. That didn’t bode well for my idea of bringing parents together to create policies that could make a difference,” Spatz says.

Undeterred, Spatz and several welfare parents returned to Sacramento several weeks later. This time, the outcome was in their favor.

"What we won was the right to count postsecondary education as a welfare-to-work activity, including bachelor's degrees and up to a master's teaching credential," Spatz explains. "This enabled parents to pursue higher education for their entire five years on welfare, and to get B.A.s in nursing and teaching and other occupations that pay more than a subsistence wage."

The following year, in 1998, LIFETIME launched a campaign focused on getting homework and study time to count as an allowable weekly work activity. Again, LIFETIME's advocacy efforts proved successful. The ruling was adopted in federal regulations under the 2005 reauthorization of TANF.

"This campaign came about because CalWORKs students were having problems meeting the 32-hour weekly welfare work requirement," Spatz says. "At the time, work requirements didn't include unsupervised home and study time, just study time in labs or supervised settings. Well, most parents did their homework at night, after their children were in bed."

LIFETIME's lobbying efforts have helped welfare recipients in every California county gain additional access to education and training opportunities, as well as transportation support for CalWORKs parents in welfare-to-work activities.

One of those who got help was Melissa Johnson, a 33-year-old single mother in Davis, Calif., who left an abusive marriage and became a CalWORKs recipient in 2002. With help from LIFETIME, Johnson was able to retain her welfare benefits while she attended Woodland Community College. She earned a nursing degree in 2008 and now works in the cancer wing of UC-Davis Medical Center. (Read more about Melissa Johnson on the Web: <http://biggoal.org/gi94>)

This year, TANF is up for reauthorization. On Feb. 25, 2010, LIFETIME and coalitions from six states went to

Legislators and advocates take a critical new look at the TANF program

According to a February 2010 Government Accountability Office report, 1.7 million families were receiving TANF benefits in 2008, down significantly from the 4.8 million families who benefited from AFDC in 1995. Declining poverty wasn't the reason. A huge portion of this caseload decline — about 87 percent, according to the report — represented eligible families who chose not to participate in TANF because of the program's work requirements, time limits, and sanction and diversion policies.

"Right now, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families does far too little to actually help needy families," said Rep. Jim McDermott (D-Wash.), chairman of the Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support, at a March 11 meeting on TANF. "When we talk about TANF, we need to start by asking ourselves this question: 'Do poor children deserve our help as their parents struggle to find or prepare themselves for employment?' I would imagine that most of us

would answer yes, and yet only 22 percent of poor children receive assistance from the TANF program.

"Too many of the people who trumpet the success of TANF are using caseload reduction as their measurement, not the number of people who rise out of poverty or who are able to find work," McDermott added.

A 2006 report from the Institute for Women's Policy Research details the struggles of current and former welfare student-parents who tried

to attend college while receiving public assistance under CalWORKs. The report — created in collaboration with LIFETIME and titled *Resilient and Reaching for More: Benefits of Higher Education for Welfare Participants and their Children* — unveils several key findings:

- Most welfare recipients want to attend college but don't know how. Instead of learning about educational opportunities through institutional channels, many got that information informally.
- Once welfare recipients are enrolled in college, they often cite resistance from caseworkers. In fact, 54 percent of those surveyed said their caseworkers were a hindrance to their college success.
- The positive effects of welfare recipients' college enrollment extended to their children's education. Forty-two percent said their children's study habits improved. Eighty-eight percent said college enhanced their ability to help their children reach their educational goals.

"Our welfare system wasn't set up to get people out of poverty," says LIFETIME founder Diana Spatz. "The goal was to reduce caseloads, promote low-wage work, reduce out-of-wedlock births and promote marriage. These are realities that we can change by changing policy."

"Our welfare system wasn't set up to get people out of poverty."

LIFETIME founder Diana Spatz

Washington, D.C., as part of a congressional briefing on TANF. Welfare moms such as Wisconsin resident Angie Grice also were there to speak about their experiences and make suggestions for reforming TANF.

"I got pregnant at 16. I couldn't stay in school and raise my child," Grice says. "I tried to apply for TANF but was denied because of my age. When I turned 18, I was discouraged from going to college for more than two years because TANF (in Wisconsin) has a community service and job requirement of 25 work hours and 10 hours of job searching.

"When, as a young mother, you're told that to get help you must allow yourself to be held back, something is wrong with the system," Grice says.

"I know many people feel help isn't mandatory or an obligation, but if you're going to help me, help me in the *right* way. Cutting off my child-care hours when I need them to attend college is not a help. Not allowing homework or study time to count toward TANF's work requirements doesn't help. Helping me means working *with* me, not against me, to see that vision through."

TANF also proved frustrating for Renita Pitts, a recovering drug addict and mother of five children and a grandmother of 21.

"My ex-husband and I worked many low-wage jobs yet still qualified for TANF. When he left our family after 23 years, I faced many barriers," Pitts says. "I was a recovering drug addict, a victim of severe domestic violence, a welfare recipient, a single mother of five and dyslexic. But TANF, especially the five-year limit, was my biggest barrier by far.

"Today, I *am* a success story. I completed Laney College with three associate's degrees. I transferred to UC-Berkeley and graduated with a double bachelor's degree. It wasn't easy. It took 10 years to get my B.A. Women on welfare with children need more time than what TANF allows when they try to work, go to school, and care for their kids. We're mothers first," Pitts insists. "We're not lazy. We're not stupid. We want to go to college. We want it for our future and our children's future."





'Lost person' found herself in college

For many people, Dec. 31, 1999, conjures memories of Y2K and the new millennium. To Renita Pitts, it was the day she found her "voice."

At the time, Pitts was a recovering drug addict in an abusive relationship — a single welfare mother with five children. After struggling for 13 years with an addiction to crack cocaine, Pitts decided to forge a new path for herself and her children. As it turns out, her path would lead to Low-Income Families' Empowerment through Education (LIFETIME).

Pitts was 37 when she started at Laney College in Oakland. On her way to class, she saw a CalWORKS office on campus. By chance, an employee told Pitts about an organization called LIFETIME.

"I hadn't set foot in a college for more than 20 years," Pitts recalls. "I was literally this lost person at first."

With the help of LIFETIME's founder, Diana Spatz, Pitts says she rediscovered her confidence. She also gained access to the resources she needed to pursue higher education while on welfare.

"You can go to college on welfare, but your caseworker may not tell you that at the time you sign your welfare-to-work contract," Pitts says. "If it hadn't been for Diana and LIFETIME, I would never have known to challenge the system or find other means of support for child care."

Like many welfare mothers, Pitts learned that the regulations governing welfare can often be obstacles to higher education access and success.

"For me, TANF was a hindrance, not help," says Pitts. "Instead of working to get you out of poverty, TANF focused on getting you into any kind of low-paying job versus bettering yourself through education."

Pitts was fortunate. Through the support services offered by LIFETIME, she turned her college education into a welfare reform strategy. Pitts graduated from Laney College with three associate's degrees — a general curriculum degree and one each in social welfare and African American

studies. She also was awarded the Presidential Medallion, which provides scholarships to students with outstanding academic achievements. Pitts' accomplishments are all the more impressive because she suffers from dyslexia.

"The good things that have come my way are because I found my voice, and that never would have happened if it wasn't for LIFETIME telling me I could do it," Pitts says.

Pitts was later hired by LIFETIME, where she used her "voice" to speak out for other welfare mothers struggling to get off the welfare track through higher education. Pitts says she found herself taking on the role of a "political activist," meeting with senators and governors, providing testimony on welfare reform, even staging peaceful demonstrations.

"It was scary but empowering," Pitts recalls. "It was important because federal and state policymakers are the people crunching the numbers. They need to see the faces behind those numbers. To be able to stand before them and say, 'Here I am, a welfare mother with a 3.8 GPA, a recovering drug addict and trying to do the right thing by going back to school. Yet, your policies are creating a roadblock, not a helping hand.'"

Ever determined, Pitts attained two bachelor's degrees from UC-Berkeley in 2008 — one in social welfare and one in African American studies. Today, she has returned to where her seeds of change first took root: Laney Community College. Pitts works there as a math instructor.

Pitts's story is still a work in progress. In addition to her full-time job, she continues to volunteer at LIFETIME. Pitts also plans to write a book about her welfare-to-college experiences, something she hopes will inspire her 21 grandchildren.

"My grandmother was murdered when I was 9 years old," Pitts says. "But in the short time she was with me, she instilled a sense of determination and to always fight for what you believe in. There is always hope. This is the legacy I want to leave."

"I found my voice, and that never would have happened if it wasn't for LIFETIME telling me I could do it."

Laney College instructor Renita Pitts

Renita Pitts' life has changed dramatically. She went from a crack-addicted welfare mother of five to a college math instructor with two bachelor's degrees. As a LIFETIME volunteer, she also uses her voice in the "scary but empowering" work of policy advocacy.



What Kids Can Do

When it's amplified,
the 'student voice'
has tremendous reach

Barbara Cervone believes people need to see, hear and read about what students can do when it comes to higher education. It was a novel idea in 2001, and it inspired Cervone to leave a prestigious job as national director of the Annenberg Challenge grant program — at the time the nation's largest private investment in the public school reform — to establish an organization appropriately called What Kids Can Do (WKCD).

Based in Providence, R.I., WKCD uses the voices and views of students — individuals who are typically left out of conversations involving pressing higher education issues — as a way to improve college readiness, access and success. WKCD takes a multimedia approach to its work, employing the Internet, books, presentations, digital media, audio slide shows and videos to share students' stories and their perspectives on shaping policy and advocacy.

"The goal is to show what young people can accomplish when they're given the opportunities and support they deserve," says Cervone. "Most important, we provide real-life examples of what students can contribute when adults take their ideas and voices seriously."

"If you don't really know from the student level what's going on with students' learning and their lives, it's really hard to shape changes in the way they are educated," adds WKCD co-founder Kathleen Cushman.

Loaded questions

The work begins with a series of questions: What do students yearn for? What do they want to do, and what supports are missing from their lives? Students provide the first-person answers, and those answers form the basis for the stories that WKCD presents.

In addition to its college access and success work, WKCD produces student stories on topics about international issues, community service and youth activism. The organization also maintains a not-for-profit publishing arm, Next Generation Press, which has published 12 books.

Cervone and Cushman showcase their work on young people and their adult allies at WKCD's Web site (www.whatkidscando.org), which attracts about 75,000 visitors monthly. Students are active collaborators in all facets of WKCD's efforts. They conduct research, act as narrators for videos, recount personal experiences for books and more.

"We call it powerful learning with a public purpose," Cervone notes. "We see students as the knowledge creators and experts in the college-going equation."

Cervone's interest in school reform dates back more than four decades. In

the early 1970s, she was instrumental in launching a multi-state network of alternative high schools. Her decision to leave Annenberg to start WKCD was a "leap of faith" — one that Cervone says she's never regretted.

Today, Cervone, 62, says WKCD has allowed her to go "wherever the work may take her." That might include an inner-city classroom in the Bronx or, as was the case in 2005, a small village with no running water or electricity in the



Barbara Cervone works with student Dalida Alves at Central High School in Providence, R.I. Cervone calls young people "the knowledge creators and experts in the college-going equation."

outskirts of Tanzania. Cervone wrote a photo essay book about the people living in that village, and WKCD used the book's proceeds to fund scholarships for the village's children to attend secondary schools.

Cervone's work with WKCD was recognized in 2008 when Civic Ventures honored her with a \$10,000 Purpose Prize fellowship. Co-founded by entre-

preneur and author Marc Freedman, the Purpose Prize program shines the spotlight on social innovators over 60 who redefine their retirement years by tackling longstanding social challenges.

Kathleen Cushman is WKCD's chief storyteller. A veteran journalist, Cushman collects and documents the voices of students, turning their words and perspectives on college access and success into stories and mixed-media pieces.

For instance, in the WKCD audio slide show *Becoming a Scholar*, Dara Walker talks about academic supports for first-generation college students. Another piece, *Academic Culture Shock*, introduces Fahad Qurashi, who confronts the challenges of transferring from a community college to a four-year institution. In WKCD's story *Beyond Graduation*, high school students and teacher Kate Gardoqui describe a classroom project on college preparation and workforce readiness.

The audio shows and stories serve a dual purpose. They act as a guide for students who may experience similar challenges. For policymakers and others, the stories offer the perspective of those in the trenches — i.e., students — about their higher education obstacles and what can be done to improve their chances of success.

Taking it personally

"It's easy for people in a higher education setting to say: 'Oh, that's someone else's job; it's not up to me,'" says Cushman. But that changes when students tell of their own struggles and successes. "When you get to know a student who is staying up all night to do her reading for a class because she didn't get home from work until 10 at night, you begin to view things differently and start to ask how you can help," Cushman adds.

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"The goal is to show what young people can accomplish when they're given opportunities and support."

Barbara Cervone, co-founder and president of What Kids Can Do



Kathleen Cushman records a student's comments for use in a mixed-media presentation. Cushman, a co-founder of What Kids Can Do, says her work "is about bringing the actual voices of students to the forefront."

'I believe in myself, so others do, too'

In third grade, Dara Walker had serious doubts about college. It wasn't until a visit to the African American History Museum in Washington, D.C., that she changed her mind.

The exhibit featured the work and life of activist poet E. Ethelbert Miller — and that got Walker thinking about social movements and their impact on systemic change.

"I looked at that exhibit, and it felt like that's what I wanted to do in life," Walker says. "I wanted to discover how I, as a student, could work with people to bring about equality and change. This is when I began to think about college — not just as a way to make money, but something I needed in order to make a difference."

Walker started her journey at Eastern Michigan University, where she excelled academically. She also started organizing events around social issues and promoting youth empowerment.

"I used to have an issue presenting in front of people. But a professor, Dr. Melvin Peters, would tell me: 'It's not about you, it's about the information.' He helped me understand that, even though I was a student, I had something important to say," Walker explains.

"In grade school, I was the one kids picked on because of my weight," Walker adds. "It kept me in the background. When I got involved in community activism, things began to change. Now, I walk into a room and people may still see a big kid. But when I speak, they start to look at me differently.

"That's when I believe in myself, so others do, too," she says.

Today, Walker is a first-year graduate student in the Pan African Studies Program at Syracuse University's Department of African American Studies, and her sense of student activism is stronger than ever. As part of her master's thesis, Walker plans to explore high school activism in Detroit during the civil rights era. She hopes the stories she uncovers will one day become part of a high school's curriculum.

"Students need to feel empowered," Walker says. "They need to feel their voices count and be connected to what they learn in school."

These types of school/real-world connections are exactly what English teacher Kate Gardoqui is forging for her students at Noble High School in North Berwick, Maine. Some time ago, Gardoqui

picked up a book written by What Kids Can Do co-founder Kathleen Cushman on what motivates kids to learn. Inspired by the book, Gardoqui created Beyond Graduation for her Advanced Placement Language and Composition class.

"This was a service-learning project that took an investigative approach so students could see how they can use academic skills to be of service," explains Gardoqui.

Beyond Graduation begins with the question, "How do students fare once they graduate from Noble High School and begin a job or enter college?" To answer, students conduct research on college and workplace readiness and collect data on high school graduation rates, college remediation and dropout trends. They then interview and write about those who have either graduated from or dropped out of Noble High.

The profiles offer an illuminating look into

how students view their high school experiences and their impact on college and career success. One student interviewed a teen mother who became pregnant while in high school; another student talked to a successful filmmaker.

Students also write recommendations for policy changes that they believe

will help improve college and workforce readiness. Gardoqui's students have made dozens of thoughtful recommendations, including mentorship programs involving younger and older students, an advisory program on college planning, and sit-down meetings with college administrators.

For aspiring journalist Zachary Harmon, Beyond Graduation is more than just a lesson on college readiness. The summer between his sophomore and junior years, Harmon was diagnosed with a form of cancer. Following surgery and radiation treatments, his cancer went into remission. As a junior, he met Kate Gardoqui, and he says her enthusiasm for his writing made him begin to take education more seriously.

Harmon points to an essay he wrote titled "Swimming Lessons," a metaphor for a person drowning in personal problems. With Gardoqui's support, he submitted the story for a Scholastic Art and Writing Award.

"It won," says Harmon. "That gave me the pat on the back to believe I had talent as a writer."

"Students need to feel empowered. They need to feel their voices count."

Dara Walker



Dara Walker (center), a first-year graduate student in African American studies at Syracuse University, has an on-campus chat with three fellow grad students, including Remy Johnson.

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"This is the purpose behind the work of WKCD," Cushman says. "It's about bringing the actual voices of students to the forefront, not as an advertisement of someone who has succeeded but as a human voice who is saying, 'I have these human problems, and here's what I'm struggling with.'"

Bringing the message of young people to a wider audience also is part of WKCD's work with KnowHow2GO (KH2GO), a national public awareness and action campaign designed to encourage young teens to prepare for college. With funds from a Lumina Foundation grant, WKCD is spearheading efforts to link national youth-serving organizations to the KH2GO initiative. The goal is to take the campaign's college-prep message to YSOs and to the young people served by these organizations.

WKCD also plans to develop a best-practices guide to share among the KH2GO networks. The idea is to help participants strengthen their individual programs, as well as learn about each other's successes and challenges.

Making connections

Engaging stakeholders at the grassroots level will be a key part of the process, says Cervone.

"To me, networks that fail to actively engage the work on the ground may fall short of their hopes and expectations. You have the meetings, papers and the funding at the top, but unless it reaches and engages the folks who at the end of the day have to produce the results, you may be limited in a network's impact."

Cushman echoes those sentiments, adding: "This is why networks that reach out to students are so important.

"Adults get out of the habit of making connections with youth," she says. "It's pretty easy to put it on someone else — teachers, parents, the church or the local community. What is most surprising to me is the degree to which it matters when *one person* creates a supportive relationship with a student. One person reaching out to one student — one potential college student — is enough to help them succeed on their higher education journey."



'College helped me define who I am'

Fahad Qurashi's hard-fought journey to college is an example of what can happen when young people are seen as valued resources rather than problems.

Qurashi is the son of Pakistani immigrants. He grew up on the east side of San Jose, Calif., in a low-income neighborhood scarred by violence, drugs and gangs.

"In high school, my focus wasn't on school," Qurashi says. "I wasn't motivated to think about the future. I was focused on the now. I didn't feel my teachers connected with me, maybe because I wasn't a model student," he claims.

At 18, Qurashi's life took an ominous turn. An altercation and drug possession with intent to sell led to his arrest on two felony charges. He was sentenced to eight months in the Elmwood County Correctional Facility.

For Qurashi, incarceration turned out to be a critically important teachable moment.

"I knew I was a major disappointment to my parents," he recalls. "They didn't visit me the entire time I was in jail. It made me really reflect on what I was doing and where I was going."

Compelled by this introspection, Qurashi enrolled in the county's Regimented Corrections Program (RCP), an effort that combines boot camp-style discipline with counseling and educational services.

Qurashi says his success in the RCP gave him a sense of accomplishment and left him wanting more.

"Graduating from the RCP was huge. It was the first time I actually applied myself to something. It left me thinking that maybe I had the potential to do something good with my life," Qurashi says.

Armed with this new outlook, Qurashi enrolled in De Anza College in Cupertino, Calif., when he was released from jail. He later transferred to Marymount College, where he discovered his academic passion: political science.

"The professors just got me," he recalls. "The bottom line is, college helped me define who I am. I didn't understand that four or five years ago. Now I get it."

After earning an associate's degree from Marymount, Qurashi attended San Francisco State University for his bachelor's degree. He says his San Francisco State experiences were the perfect training ground for his interests in policymaking, helping shape him into a "serious" student.

Qurashi's academic success at San Francisco State led to an internship with a Youth Leadership Institute (YLI) program designed to help prevent tobacco use among young people. That experience fed Qurashi's growing appetite for policy-

making and advocacy, and at the same time opened a career pathway. Six months into the program, YLI offered Qurashi a paid position as a program assistant. After graduating from San Francisco State, Qurashi accepted a full-time position with YLI.

Today, Qurashi, 26, remains focused on youth-development issues, working with YLI to develop programs and services that bring young people and their adult allies together for positive social change. Qurashi says the work reminds him of how far he's come while also giving him the chance to help other young people discover the tremendous potential of higher education.

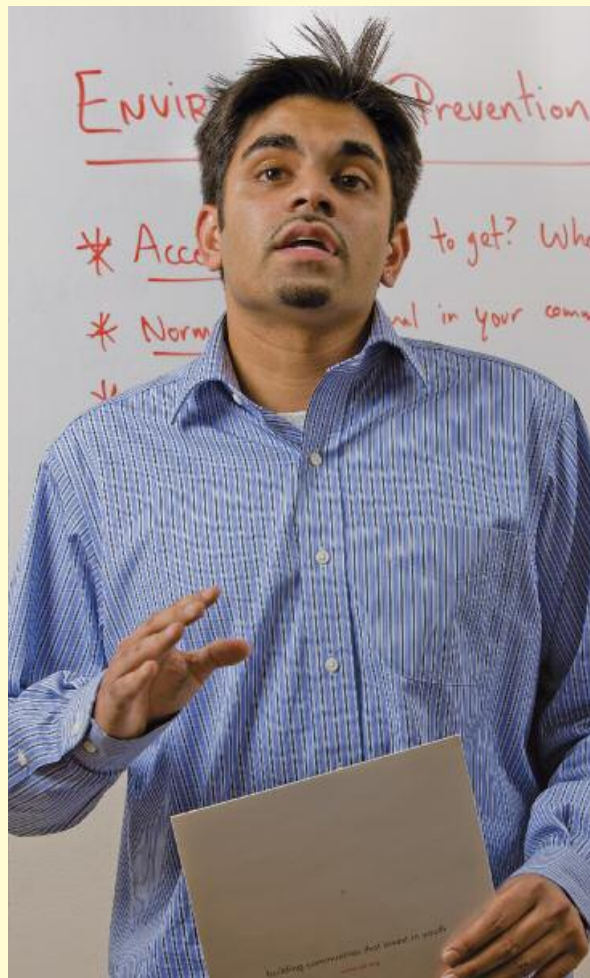
And he is helping others; just ask 18-year-old Luisa Sicairos. She met Qurashi four years ago through Qurashi's work with YLI. The experience sparked her interest in youth activism, Sicairos says, and she began to volunteer regularly with Qurashi to work on community issues she believed in.

"Fahad opened doors for me, whether it's with my speaking skills or homework. He pushed me to finish my goals," Sicairos says.

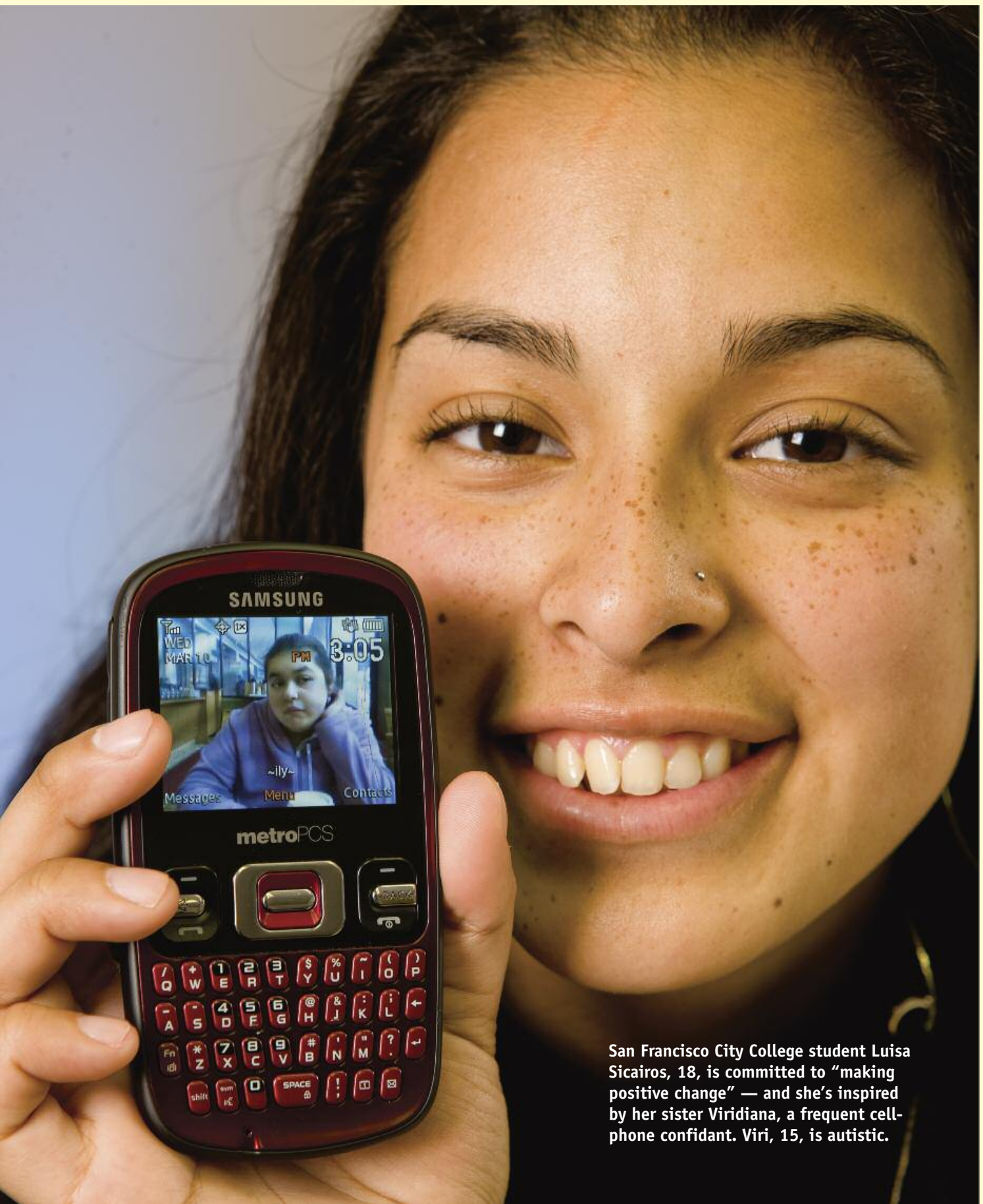
Sicairos, a first-year student at San Francisco City College, hopes to become a social worker. It's a

career goal that stems from her desire to make a difference in her community and was inspired, in part, by Sicairos' close relationship with her younger sister, Viridiana, who suffers from autism.

"Working with Fahad and the YLI showed me that young people can make a difference," Sicairos says. "We do have something important to contribute when it comes to making positive change in our communities if adults are willing to listen."



Fahad Qurashi overcame a troubled youth, including an eight-month jail sentence at age 18. Now 26, he's a college graduate and works as a policy advocate for the Youth Development Institute in San Francisco.



San Francisco City College student Luisa Sicaireo, 18, is committed to “making positive change” — and she’s inspired by her sister Viridiana, a frequent cell-phone confidant. Viri, 15, is autistic.



ENLACE Florida

Giving youth a seat at the table changes policies AND people

Edwin Estevez has fond memories of playing catch with his father in the Dominican Republic, but the recollections aren't merely nostalgic. Even today, Estevez draws on those childhood experiences for valuable life lessons.

"My father would throw the baseball very fast," Estevez recalls. "He was trying to teach me to stay on task — even when it appeared harder than my abilities would allow me to perform."

Today, Estevez is the one who's bringing the heat in his work as a senior researcher for ENLACE Florida. The organization, created in 2007, is a statewide network that promotes college readiness, access and success for Latinos and other underrepresented students.

“Network” is a key word in that description. ENLACE (pronounced en-LAH-say) is derived from the Spanish word *enlazar*, which means to weave a connection so that the whole is stronger than its parts — and the group depends on interconnectedness as it tackles the important work of increasing college completion.

The push to enroll and graduate more students from college is supported by workforce trends. Labor economists and other experts say that, in coming years, the vast majority of well-paying jobs will require education or training beyond high school.

Already, the business sector is calling for more college-educated workers: A survey released early this year by the Business Roundtable reports that 65 percent of employers require an associate’s degree or higher for the majority of available jobs.

A talent gap looms

Unfortunately, millions of young people run the risk of never qualifying for the 21st century workforce.

In Florida, this reality has become increasingly palpable. *Closing the Talent Gap, A Business Perspective* — a January 2010 report from the Florida Council of 100 — forecasts a severe “talent gap” for Florida. For the state to reach the education level of the 10 most productive states within the next two decades, it will need 4.5 million adults with baccalaureate degrees. That’s 1.3 million more than are expected at current attainment rates, the report says.

Florida’s looming human capital crisis is reflected in the following statistics:

- Of every 100 Florida students today, 76 will graduate from high school, 51 will attend college, and 32 will earn a bachelor’s degree within six years. (*Closing the Talent Gap*, Florida Council of 100, January 2010.)
- More than 55 percent of all students entering Florida’s public postsecondary institutions require remediation in math, reading, and/or writing. Ninety-four percent of students who need remediation attend community colleges. (*Half of College Students Needing Remediation Drop Out*, Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, May 2007.)

■ At Miami Dade College, 80 percent of incoming students need remedial courses before they can begin college-level coursework. About 25 percent need remediation in all three basic skills areas — reading, writing, and math. (*Assessing and Improving Student Outcomes: What We Are Learning at Miami Dade College*, Community College Research Center/Achieving the Dream, January 2008)

ENLACE Florida is committed to improving the higher education pathway for Florida’s students. The organization, which has received funding from the



Paul Dosal, executive director of ENLACE Florida, understands the power of youth. “Students are the foot soldiers for many of our policy efforts,” he says.

W.K. Kellogg Foundation as well as Lumina Foundation, pursues several strategies to advance its college-access and success agenda, including policy research, advocacy and student support. ENLACE — an acronym for ENgaging Latino, African-American and other Communities for Education — makes a point of enlisting students in its activities.

“Students are the foot soldiers for many of our policy efforts,” explains Paul Dosal, ENLACE’s executive director. “They represent a valuable component of the policy conversations that are taking place.”

Two years ago, ENLACE Florida created a policy/advocacy model for student leadership development called the Florida Student Education Policy conference (FSEP). The effort, which is the first of its kind in the state, immerses students in the process of policymaking.

“We’re giving students — the individuals most affected by higher education policy decisions — a voice in the process,” Estevez says. “The idea is to open up a channel of communication between students and policy leaders — one that can lead to meaningful improvements in college readiness, access and success.”

The conference is structured in five phases, beginning in the fall with a competitive recruitment process for student delegates. Once selected, students do research on their assigned education theme. They gather data; interview community members, policymakers, higher education leaders and others; develop and write policy analyses; interact with students from other delegations and, finally, prepare their presentations for the conference.

Networks that last

Students also collaborate with other delegations. Communicating with the help of digital tools such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Blackboard, students build their own networks of student advocates — networks that remain active once the conference has ended.

During the conference, students participate in a mock legislative process to debate and discuss the policy recommendations developed by each of the delegations. Using data and other research to challenge each other, they eventually reach consensus and then craft their final policy recommendations. This year, the conference themes included financial aid and high school curriculum reform.

The effort culminates with ENLACE Florida Day at Florida’s State Capitol, where students present their policy recommendations to legislators. Among the suggestions students made this year: Higher curriculum standards in K-12, tougher graduation requirements in high school and a change in the way Florida disburses its financial aid.

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Edwin Estevez, a senior researcher for ENLACE Florida, meets with students during their visit to the Capitol to meet with Florida lawmakers. "We're giving students...a voice in the process," he says, "one that can lead to meaningful improvements in college readiness, access and success."

Students from campuses across Florida gather at the Historic Capitol in Tallahassee prior to their visit with legislators. The event, held in March, demonstrated ENLACE's hands-on approach to policymaking and leadership development.



Students also share their personal stories with Florida's lawmakers, offering insight on the challenges facing first-generation college students and suggesting steps policymakers might take to minimize those barriers.

ENLACE's hands-on approach to policymaking generates real interest and enthusiasm among students for higher education reform. It enhances students' understanding of policy analysis and advocacy, and at the same time it allows students to offer input on issues affecting their college education and that of future generations.

"Students leave the conference feeling that they actually have a voice worth hearing in the 21st century," says Linda Goudy, an ENLACE adviser from the Florida Institute of Education. "This alone goes a long way in helping students develop a sense of self as someone who has something worthy to say. And now they've learned a way in which they can say it and in which many people of influence will hear them."

"Florida students want to be heard," Estevez says. "If we empower them by giving them a voice in the process, ENLACE is better positioned to help advocate for policies that truly reflect the needs of students."

'Incredibly articulate'

And policymakers are listening. Florida's state senators and representatives are overwhelmingly positive in their reactions to students' comments.

"The ENLACE students were incredibly articulate, well-informed and surprisingly objective when they met with legislators to present their policy recommendations," recalls Democrat State Sen. Nan H. Rich. "I was so impressed by what they had to say that I used some of their arguments when I spoke about higher education on the floor last year. Our legislators need to listen more at the grassroots level," Rich insists.

"As a former high school teacher, it's gratifying to see students involved at a young age in advocacy work," adds State Rep. Dwight M. Bullard, also a Democrat. "Even more important, at the end of the day, ENLACE and its work with students remind those of us who are 20 or 30 years removed from

college of why we are here and the impact that our legislative decisions have on the future."

Republican State Rep. Anitere Flores agrees.

"Sometimes we tend to focus a lot on the negative things that may be happening in higher education," she says. "But this experience shows us something very good that's going on in our universities and with our students, particularly with many of our minority students."

This year marked the second year for the student conference. Sixty-eight students — ranging from freshmen to seniors and representing 10 Florida



Florida Atlantic University Professor Nancy Poulson, an adviser for the Florida Student Education Policy conference, says the event "unites students around a common purpose."

universities — participated in the 2010 program. Sixty-five percent of students were women, 55 percent African American and 40 percent Latino. Approximately 70 percent were first-generation students.

When students make their conference presentations, a serious tone pervades the room; students are poised, prepared and focused. Christina Restrepo, 20, says there's no doubt that the conference is a "big deal."

Restrepo, a first-generation college student, was raised by a single mom who worked two janitorial jobs, mornings and nights, to support the family. The hardships that dogged her family made Restrepo determined to follow a different path, one that included college.

"I love learning, especially science," she says. "When I was in high school, I wasn't prepared the way I should have been. When I first got to college, I had difficulty. That's why I am so passionate about the ENLACE conference. It focuses on policy, making changes and giving us, the students, a chance to speak out on issues that affect our education," Restrepo says.

A rare opportunity

Stanford Taylor, 21, is a junior at the University of North Florida. Like Restrepo, he believes participation in the conference instilled in him a sense of ownership for his college education. Just as important, Stanford says the experience gave him the opportunity to make real a difference for younger students.

"People don't get this kind of opportunity every day — the chance to make policy recommendations affecting the entire state of Florida. It's gratifying to know that you, as a student, are being listened to by people of influence. At the same time, you're doing something right for your community," Taylor says.

"I've been involved in mentoring since the fifth grade. For me, the chance to work with ENLACE takes this concept to a whole new level; it allows students to get involved in something that could produce large-scale change for the students of tomorrow," he adds.

Nancy Kason Poulson, professor of Spanish and Latin American Studies at Florida Atlantic University, is one of the advisers for the FSEP conference. She firmly believes that students' policymaking efforts are resonating with Florida lawmakers. In 2009, after students recommended tougher high school graduation requirements, the Florida Legislature passed House Bill 1293, which echoed several of the students' suggestions.

"The comments that students give make an impact with these elected officials because the students are the ones



First-generation college student Christina Restrepo says the Florida education policy conference was “a big deal.”

living the repercussions of the policies being made,” Poulson says.

“These students are the true face of policymaking,” adds Gloria Laureano, an assistant vice president at the University of Central Florida. “Whenever legislators make a decision, they need to remember that student’s face.”

More than offering students firsthand experience in policymaking or giving legislators the opportunity to meet their young constituents, ENLACE exposes students to formalized networks and their potential to effect large-scale change in higher education.

“One of the most important elements of the conference is that it unites students around a common purpose, which then becomes a lesson on shared goals and how collaboration can make a meaningful difference,” Poulson says.

Heather Monroe-Ossi, an ENLACE adviser at the Florida Institute of Education, agrees.

“The conference is a win-win,” she says. “Elected officials see real people for whom their policies have impact. College students, many of whom are first-generation students, get the opportunity to witness what government in action looks like. This has been transformational.”

Mentor says program takes advocacy to ‘a whole other level’

Frank Hernandez wants a say in how Florida’s higher education policies are created, and he’s intent on making sure his voice is heard.

Hernandez discovered his interest in advocacy at the University of South Florida (USF), where he met Paul Dosal, executive director of ENLACE Florida. Based in Tampa, the organization’s goal is to prepare minority students for college.

Hernandez signed on as a mentor for an ENLACE program focusing on increasing college awareness among middle school students. The experience opened his eyes to the rewards of community advocacy. It also set in motion what would become a passion for higher education policy, Hernandez says.

“When I heard about the application process for ENLACE’s conference, I was intrigued. I soon realized it was something that could take advocacy to a whole other level,” Hernandez recalls.

What Hernandez discovered was an intense six-month study in policy and advocacy.

“Not only are we creating this network of college students from across the state to focus on higher education, but we’re also sharing knowledge with each other,” explains Hernandez, who served as the chair of the USF delegation in 2010. “To me, this is the most crucial aspect of the conference.”

The network also provides a mechanism that helps Hernandez and other conference participants share their knowledge with the local community. Specifically, Hernandez and other students meet regularly with organizations in Hillsborough County to conduct presentations on the lessons learned from the conference.

“People are blown away because they see that younger students are interested in policy issues and that it’s more than just talk. We’re backing up our words with solutions and evidence,” Hernandez says.

“What I like about the conference is that you don’t have just three or four people sitting in a room and trying to dissect a policy. It’s taking the message to the community and getting people to understand how these policies affect them,” he adds. “It’s not just about numbers. Policy is something that affects people’s lives.”

It’s that message that Hernandez hopes students can continue to shape and deliver.

“We’re making a difference,” Hernandez says. “We’re empowering certain communities that may not have had the tools to speak up for themselves.”

Frank Hernandez (left), a graduate student at the University of South Florida (USF), talks with ENLACE’s Paul Dosal. Hernandez, who led the USF delegation to the March conference, says such events have real impact. “People are blown away because they see that younger students are interested in policy issues, and that it’s more than just talk,” he says.





Leadership's fresh face

Young policy advocate sees education conference as a springboard

Twenty-year-old Vincent Evans is inspired by the words of activist Terry Tempest Williams: "The eyes of the future are looking back at us, and they are praying that we will see far beyond our own time."

Evans believes activism is his life's calling. It's a belief forged in childhood, when he began to hone his leadership skills in student government. Those skills were further developed at Florida A&M University (FAMU), where he is a senior studying political science and pre-law.

"I've had opportunities to see firsthand how politics work," Evans explains. "Because of those opportunities, I feel I need to do whatever I can to ensure that the people who make policies that are affecting my education and my little brother's and sister's education hear and learn from those who are affected by their decisions.

"I believe education is the civil rights issue of my generation. This makes it imperative that the voices of students reach our elected officials. They need to know that we really are the way of the future," Evans says.

Poised and articulate, Evans has a firm grasp of policymaking and an impressive political "resume." In 2008, he helped mobilize nearly 4,000 students to vote in the 2008 presidential election. He has served as director of student lobbying and as president of the FAMU Chapter of College Democrats. He also is a member of the Student National

Alumni Association, the Student Coalition for Justice and the FAMU chapter of the NAACP.

These experiences have introduced Evans — a first-generation college student — to several influential political figures, including President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, members of Congress and staff members at the U.S. Department of Education. The lessons gleaned from those encounters cemented his interest in politics as a future career.

"I think my passion for politics comes from having had a seat at the table," Evans says, adding: "I believe there must be new voices in our political process, the voices of today's youth."

Those beliefs, in part, led Evans to ENLACE Florida and the conference ENLACE developed to involve students in education policy.

This is the second year that Evans has participated in the Florida Student Education Policy conference (FSEP). He sees it as a vital venue for students who want to contribute to higher education policy reform.

"We do have ideas to offer about our college experience," Evans insists. "And that's what this conference does; it puts the student voice in front of those debating our future."

It's more than just students who reap the benefits. As part

of the conference, students develop policy recommendations that they later present to members of the Florida Legislature. That feedback helps lawmakers focus on the human aspects and impacts of the policies they create. Says Republican State Rep. John Legg:

"Of the interest groups I've met in the past year, I can count on one hand those that truly stand out. The comments from Vincent Evans as part of the ENLACE's summit left a lasting impression. It's one thing to teach kids facts; it's something entirely different to help mold students into leaders and advocates."

Evans is well on his way to becoming just such a leader. In 2008, he served a fellowship with Young People For (YP4), a leader-

ship-development network that works with emerging young leaders on issues affecting their local communities. The organization was created by the People For the American Way Foundation, founded by television producer Norman Lear.

Evans' goals include law school and a possible run for political office, beginning with a seat in the Florida Legislature.

"Someone once told me a long time ago to run as far as you can run, go as far as you can go, and you will land in something good. That's what I intend to do," Evans says.

"I believe education is the civil rights issue of my generation. This makes it imperative that the voices of students reach our elected officials. They need to know that we really are the way of the future."

*Vincent Evans,
Florida A&M University senior*

Florida A&M University senior Vincent Evans meets in the Florida House chamber with State Rep. John Legg. Evans' interaction with legislators "left a lasting impression," says Legg. "It's one thing to teach kids facts," he adds. "It's something entirely different to help mold students into leaders and advocates."



Lumina Foundation for Education
P.O. Box 1806, Indianapolis, IN 46206-1806
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May 2010

