Paving the Road to Higher Ed for Students Hit by Homelessness

By Cheryl Opper

At age 18, Suffolk University sophomore Marc-Daniel Paul seems destined for success. A Brockton High graduate who experienced homelessness as a teen, Paul was chosen as a Bank of America Student Leader and published his first book, *Breathing Ink: The Heart of Poetry*, during his senior year in high school. As an intern in the office of state Sen. Mark C. Montigny (D-New Bedford) this summer, Paul wrote an amendment to the Massachusetts State Budget (Section 18 of Chapter 15A of the General Laws), which will save college students with MassHealth insurance coverage thousands of dollars by allowing them to remain on their health insurance and not be required to purchase their school’s health insurance. The bill was signed by Gov. Deval Patrick in July. (The law will not go into effect until July 2014 because it is not yet known how the new provision will interface with the Affordable Care Act.)

But beneath the outward signs of Paul’s success is a dramatic example of how one determined young person can overcome the challenges of homelessness and fulfill his dream of a postsecondary education, despite the odds against him. It is a story heard infrequently among the organizations familiar with the circumstances of homeless and unaccompanied youth.

The National Center on Family Homelessness estimates only one in four homeless teens will graduate high school. According to the 2011 Youth Risk Behavior Survey administered by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) in conjunction with the Centers for Disease Control, approximately 13,157 Massachusetts high school students (4.1%) were homeless, including approximately 5,853 (2.0%) unaccompanied youth. Unaccompanied youth include runaways, youth abandoned by parents or guardians, youth who have fled unsafe home situations, and youth who have aged out of foster care. The annual ESE data collection shows that in 2011, homeless high school students made up one-third of all identified homeless students. One nonprofit organization in Massachusetts is working to improve these statistics by helping youth impacted by homelessness stay in school, graduate and pursue a higher education.

*Suffolk University sophomore Marc-Daniel Paul helped write an amendment to the Massachusetts state budget that will save some college students thousands of dollars on their health insurance. Paul, a summer intern in the office of State Sen. Mark C. Montigny, attributes his interest in civic engagement to the opportunities he received as a student in SOWMA’s High School Plus program.*

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Four years ago, School on Wheels of Massachusetts (SOWMA), added a High School Plus (HSP) program to its menu of educational services. SOWMA is the only organization in Massachusetts providing one-on-one afterschool tutoring/mentoring, new backpacks and school supplies, college assistance, and educational advocacy and support to children impacted by homelessness in multiple communities. SOWMA develops an educational success plan for each student. The organization connects high school students with colleges, vocational programs and other agencies to help them move forward with their academic goals. In addition, HSP assists students with completing the applications for college and financial aid, SAT registration, college visits, and scholarship opportunities. When students need help meeting the cost of school fees, books, housing deposits, and dorm supplies, SOWMA assists them.

HSP places a special emphasis on the needs of unaccompanied youth and provides advocacy, guidance and support to all students impacted by homelessness throughout their postsecondary careers. The HSP staff has moved several students into their college dorm rooms and attended college orientations when students had no other adult to accompany them.

Jakiel Moses-Harris will enter UMass Boston with a double major in kinesiology and psychology this fall, thanks to the support he received from the HSP. After his family moved into a shelter during his sophomore year in high school, the teenager had trouble staying focused in school and didn’t have the money to play school-sponsored sports. He felt embarrassed to have friends visit him at the shelter. Surrounding by turmoil and uncertainty about the future, Moses-Harris signed up for SOWMA while living in the shelter. The organization proved to be a lifeline throughout his ordeal. They matched him with a tutor who served as a role model, and helped him focus on his grades. They bought him a new laptop and a book bag filled with school supplies, and paid his basketball fees in school. Despite living in a shelter and “couch surfing” during his 11th and 12th grades, Moses-Harris graduated from high school, became a volunteer trainer for the Canton High School football team, and enrolled in Massasoit Community College. This fall, he will transfer to UMass Boston as a sophomore and work as an assistant coach for the Canton High School football team.

Moses-Harris’s positive experience stands in stark contrast to the tragic outcomes many unaccompanied youth undergo. According to a recent report from the Massachusetts Special Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth, unaccompanied and homeless students may endure “multiple school transfers, significant educational gaps, frequent absences and tardy arrivals, a lack of supplies and space to do homework and projects, poor medical, dental and mental health care, distractions, and an inability to attend to lessons.” In addition, young people who experience homelessness as adolescents often face futures marked by increased risk of death, exposure to violence, susceptibility to exploitation and high-risk behaviors, and poor academic performance with increased risk of dropping out of school.

With higher education offering a potential avenue out of a bleak alternative, SOWMA has devoted countless hours to increasing the educational opportunities for young people impacted by homelessness. The HSP program works with both students who are currently homeless as well as those who moved from shelter to housing. SOWMA first meets a student when he or she is experiencing homelessness. Once part of the SOWMA family, the student can continue to receive services for as long as he or she needs support.

For Marc-Daniel Paul, HSP created the foundation for the future he dreams of having: “I never would have had the political exposure I had in high school with the Bank of America Student Leader program without School on Wheels,” he said. “They helped me find the program, assisted with my essay, and gave me a clearer vision of what I wanted to do. They’ve had a tremendous impact on helping me get on the path I am on today.”

Cheryl Opper is founder and executive director of School on Wheels of Massachusetts.