

NBC's Phillips Speaks to Students

Mentoring program honors first grad to be hired as teacher

By Alison Bert, The Journal News

Friday, August 18, 2000



Stone Phillips extolled the virtues of mentoring yesterday to a crowd of 150 in the Today's Students, Tomorrow's Teachers program. Mentors help young people achieve their goals, he said.

But Phillips, co-anchor of "Dateline NBC," does not mentor anyone.

That likely mattered little to the approximately 150 people who attended the fifth annual recognition event at Manhattanville College's Reid Castle. The program, based in White Plains, is a career development organization that recruits, mentors and trains culturally diverse high school students to be teachers.

Phillips is too busy to be a mentor, said his wife, Debra Phillips, who runs a mentoring program for the Mental Health Association of Westchester County. But he helps out however he can, and said he's grateful for the career-shaping lessons he learned from his high school principal and English teacher.

He sat at the table of Maria Elena Henao, who soon will move from her downtown Ossining home, where she looks out at drug dealers, to the grassy campus of Manhattanville College.

Next to her was Emerly Martinez, a native of the Dominican Republic, who is about to embark on his new career as a school teacher.

Both are the first in their families to go to college. Martinez, whose mother raised him and his two siblings alone, said he never could have afforded college without the help of the organization.

In exchange for a 50 percent tuition scholarship to one of 12 area colleges, students agree to teach in a participating district for a least a year.

Executive Director Bettye Perkins, who at 50 is completing a doctorate in education at Fordham University, said her aim has been "to grow teachers" who could become role models for students of color.

Perkins, a Hartsdale resident, started the program in 1994 as a graduate student project. It has blossomed from its roots at Ossining High School to a non-profit organization that serves 185 students from 19 school districts in Westchester, Putnam and Rockland counties. This year, it will expand into Ulster and Fairfield counties.

This year's program paid home age to Martinez - the first program graduate to be hired as a teacher. Martinez, who started the program the second year it was offered, will start teaching social studies in his home district of Ossining this fall. Three of the Ossining students who started the year before changed their minds about becoming teachers.

In high school, Emerly Martinez was an average student, but his mentor found something extraordinary about him.

"You could see that the other kids looked for his guidance," said Angelo Piccirillo, a biology teacher at Ossining High School.

Through the program, Martinez combined his leadership skills with his desire to help people, which he already did in his volunteer work for the Ossining Fire Department and Volunteer Ambulance Corp.

Henao's father left when she was a baby, and her mother didn't speak English. Her family was homeless for a few years before she started kindergarten. Her early school experiences spurred her to become a teacher of English as a second language.

"When I didn't know English, they would always put me to the side," she said. "They wouldn't include me in the activities."

Yesterday, Henao strode from one table to another, greeting her colleagues in the program. No, she's not nervous about college, she said.

As for Martinez, who will greet his first class in three weeks, he smiles wide. "I'll probably not sleep the night before."