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Quantum Leap soars in Dover

By LARRY CLOW
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DOVER— They represent the first group to complete this afterschool program for at-risk youth, 12 students who remained all four years who are preparing to do what many thought would likely never take place — graduate from high school.

In a sense, the Quantum Opportunities Program represented a symbolic quantum leap for these students, and as QOP coordinator Liz Puchacz put it, “that's victory in and of itself.”

Yet in Dover, it's just the post-high school jump start they sought to provide these often troubled teenagers, many of whom would have likely dropped out if not for the afterschool homework help, tutoring, lessons in job interviewing skills and other activities given to them at the Seymour Osman Community Center.

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A program that helps students develop valuable life skills while placing an emphasis on community outreach projects. QOP associates, as the students taking part as called, participated in Dover Clean-Up Day earlier this month. On June 17, several will travel to Waveland, Miss., an area particularly affected by the hurricanes that struck the Gulf Coast last year, to assist with clean-up efforts.

On a recent calm afternoon at the center, some of these students took a moment to kick back and



*Dover High School students participating in the Quantum Opportunities Program recently reflected on their four years in the program. From left are Paulina Frost, QOP coordinator Liz Puchacz, Chris Nesluson and Sarah Arlen.
(Clow/Democrat staff photo)*

reflect on the four years they spent within the program. While all have been grouped as “at risk,” their personalities and appearances were quite different from one another. Some will go on to college, others directly to work. But for QOP coordinator Liz Puchacz, the fact that all the kids are graduating is cause enough to celebrate. One said the program proved beneficial and was a blast.

Chris Nesluson, a quiet teen with long, curly hair that falls in front of his face, said he enjoyed his time in the program.

“I got a lot of community experience,” he said.

“He's not much of a public speaker,” said Paulina Frost, sitting nearby.

Frost's cherubic face is adorned with piercings, her hair colored a shockingly bright pink. Frost, describing herself as having some experience when it comes to public speaking, is more forthcoming than Nesluson about the program. “They've kind of molded us into proper citizens,” she said. “We've learned a lot more than regular high school graduates.”

The Quantum Opportunities Program started in Philadelphia in 1989 as a way to prevent at-risk youth from dropping out of high school. But the program's aims have expanded to teaching kids life skills, preparing them for college and involving them in their local communities. In 2000, the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, the nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that funds the program, began expanding the program across the country.

Johnnie Gage, chief operating officer of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, said the QOP has provided participants and society as a whole with numerous benefits.

“Over time, we found it reduced the kind of outcomes we were looking (at), a reduction in juvenile crime, social skills building, a reduction in teen pregnancy and an increase in educational enhancement.”

The program came to Dover courtesy of Thad Mandsager, director of family services at the Seymour Osman Community Center. A group of 20 students identified as at risk of dropping out of high school were selected for the program. Participation was voluntary. Over the four years, some students moved out of town and others drifted away from the program but a core group of 12 students remained active, Mandsager said.

As part of the program, associates receive a small stipend, usually between \$1 and \$1.33, depending on their age, for every hour they spend taking part in QOP activities. Though the students are selected from Dover High School, the program is not officially affiliated with the high school. Nevertheless, Mandsager said he and the other QOP coordinators regularly communicate with guidance counselors at the high school to “make sure the kids are progressing as they should.”

The program is not limited to educational programs. During the last four years, associates have gone on a whale watch, saw a production of “The Nutcracker” and participated in the recent

“Global Night Commute” at the University of New Hampshire, an international event designed to raise awareness of Ugandan children forced to serve in rebel armies.

Sarah Arlen, a QOP associate set to graduate from Dover High School in June, said her four years in the program were a blast.

“It taught me a lot about myself, about getting organized, just getting involved,” she said.

Sally Thorn, director of the guidance department at Dover High School, said the school does not track the individual progress of students involved in QOP. However, Thorn believes the program has a positive influence.

“Any enhancement of support systems for students is beneficial,” she said.

Though stipends are not the motivating factor for kids participating in QOP, Gage said the promise of a regular stipend does serve an important purpose. The years between middle school and high school are an important transitional period for students, and even a small stipend can be enough to divert associates' attention from negative influences.

“What we've found is ... oftentimes, kids get around that age, they're transitioning from grade school to high school, they're a bit more independent, fashions become attractive ... (and) that poses as a distraction oftentimes,” he said. The stipends keep students focused on their work at the QOP, which in turn keeps them from falling prey to outside distractions and negative influences. Some students don't take the money, according to Gage.

Arlen views the stipend as nothing but an added bonus.

“I like being here anyway,” she said. “I think everyone took it very seriously and worked hard for the money.”

The future for this year's crop of QOP graduates is varied. Arlen is taking a year off before she heads to Stratham Community Technical College to study early childhood education. During her time in QOP, Arlen has been volunteering at the Woodman Park School three days a week. This summer, she'll be working as a camp counselor for Easter Seals.

While Neslusion will begin classes at the University of New Hampshire in the fall, Frost plans on taking a year off before heading to college. She wants to study nursing and has her eye on eventually becoming a tattoo and body-piercing artist.

“I want to do something that isn't average,” she said.