



State of New Jersey
HIGHER EDUCATION

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
September 18, 2012

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National GEAR-UP Week Shines Light on Trenton Student's Achievement in Winning Scholarship to Princeton

State Program Helps 2,400 At-Risk Students in 58 Schools throughout New Jersey

After a childhood dominated by hard work, long hours of lonely study and a mother who forbade her to leave their South Trenton home to play, Dennisse Calle, 17, let her emotions surge when she learned recently that she had been accepted to Princeton University.

"I cried," she said. "I thanked God. And I cried."

As a student in the public schools, the Ecuadoran immigrant knew the odds. But with help from her teachers at Trenton's Central High School - West, and with steady guidance from New Jersey's GEAR UP program, she stayed focused on her goals.

September 10 through 14 marked National GEAR UP week, celebrating the success of the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs initiative which identifies students like Calle as early as the seventh grade and gives them the support they need to succeed.

"Given a chance, all children can learn, and all children should have access to a quality education that can be the gateway to a rich and rewarding life," said Secretary of Higher Education Rochelle Hendricks, whose office administers the GEAR UP program.

Students enrolled in New Jersey's GEAR UP program scored an average of 70 points higher on the math section of the 2010 SAT and 50 points higher on the verbal section than the average scores of students in the same high schools. Since 2000, New Jersey GEAR UP has maintained an overall college enrollment rate of 77 per cent. This rate exceeds that of low-income students in New Jersey, who enroll at a rate of 48.8 per cent, said NJ GEAR UP Director Errol Bruce. He announced that Calle has been awarded a \$5,550 annual scholarship, funded by the GEAR UP program, to study at Princeton.

The New Jersey GEAR UP State Project strives to increase the number of low-income New Jersey students who are prepared to enter and succeed in college. GEAR UP, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Education, services students in eight cities and 58 schools throughout the state, addressing the educational needs and aspirations of disadvantaged, at-risk youth in grades six through twelve.

Students benefit from after-school and Saturday tutoring, summer programs, mentoring, counselling, and test preparation. They receive information about financial aid, make college

visits and learn the importance of taking rigorous high school courses to prepare for postsecondary education.

Calle's mother and father work two jobs each day and have little formal education. Her mother, Monica, is employed as a maid, and her father, Ezequiel, is a driver for a car dealership, taking cars from one location to another.

"They work each day from about 6 a.m. until 10 p.m.," Calle says. When they come home from their day jobs, they go back out at night, working as cleaners.

"I notice that when you are not educated, you are restricted in a lot of ways. I don't want to be restricted," Calle explains.

She credits her teachers at Trenton's Central High School - West with paying special attention to her.

"My teachers were mean to me!" she says with a smile. "They tore apart everything that I wrote." But she knows now that her teachers – Catherine Halevy and Jeannette Devine – saw her talent and helped her learn how to express herself.

Wayne Murray the director of the S.M.I.L.E./GEAR UP program in Trenton said he worked with Calle since she was in the seventh grade.

"When I first knew her, she was so shy. Look at her now!" he says. Her parents came to the required GEAR UP meetings every month to learn about their daughter's progress.

"There was something in her that we all saw," said Murray. "We see it in all of our students, but some of them don't get it. Dennisse understands the direct correlation between hard work and success. We're extremely proud of her."

Calle says her parents, as immigrants, never doubted she would succeed.

"Immigrant parents expect their children to be doctors, lawyers or engineers," she says. "They have a vision for their children."

Perhaps that is why, when they learned Calle had been accepted to Princeton, they were much less effusive in their praise. They know she is thinking about becoming an immigration lawyer to help others. So they expect her to attend law school – at another Ivy League institution.

"My parents were unemotional about Princeton. They said, 'Good job. Now you have to work toward Harvard!'"

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