BY CHARLES SALZBERG

PARTNERS

Through a unique collaboration, SU and the High School for Leadership and Public Service inspire students to succeed

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOE LAWTON
"You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself,
Any direction you choose."
—Dr. Seuss, Oh, the Places You'll Go!

Quoted on a mural created by six HSLAPS interns, 1998.

In Learning

Early one chilly mid-April morning, a dozen high school sophomores and juniors—all from the inner city—gathered in front of Syracuse University's Lubin House in New York City. Along with three adult chaperons, they waited for a bus that would take them nearly 300 miles upstate, further from their homes than many of them had ever been. Their journey would give them a glimpse of what their lives might be like in two or three years, a life that could take them far from the streets of Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, Staten Island, or even lower Manhattan, where they attend the High School for Leadership and Public Service (HSLAPS). This unique New York City public school is in a special partnership with Syracuse University that began in 1993. Now, thanks to a program backed, in part, by the Friends of HSLAPS, an SU alumni group based in New York City, the students could venture into the alien world of college, a world that some had never before even dreamed about.

Traveling with the students was Ann Gilligan, an HSLAPS teacher who serves as the liaison between Syracuse University and the high school. "We were driving up there and it started to rain lightly," Gilligan recalls, as she sits at a round table near the door of her spacious yet sparse office on the sixth floor of the downtown building that houses HSLAPS. "As we got closer, we looked out the window, and one of the kids said, 'Is that
snow on the side of the road?' It was, and it kept snowing until we arrived in Syracuse.”

A fitting welcome to upstate New York. But the students were undaunted, perhaps because it was an adventure they had prepared for during the previous weeks—or at least they thought so. They had, for instance, seen photographs of the University. “Everything looked so close,” says Leslie Stewart, an HSLAPS sophomore with a special interest in journalism. “But when we got there we saw how spread out it was.”

And there were other surprises, in large part because, photographs or not, the students had little idea of what to expect, and even a detailed itinerary didn’t offer much help. “One student,” Gilligan says, “couldn’t understand the half-hour time allocation for the bookstore. ‘How are we going to spend so much time in a bookstore?’ he asked. But once he got there, he bought everything in sight. If it had an ‘SU’ on it, he bought it.”

The trip made such an impression on the students that the next day, on the bus trip home, one girl asked to borrow another girl’s cell phone. “She called her parents,” Gilligan says, “to find out how much money they had in the bank. She said, ‘It costs $30,000 a year to go to Syracuse and I just want to make sure you have it covered.’”

**BUILDING A BOND**

Eight years ago, the idea of a New York City public high school affiliated with Syracuse University was proposed by Donald Schupak, a New York City investment banker who graduated from SU’s College of Arts and Sciences in 1964 and College of Law in 1966. At the time, SU was looking for ways to raise its profile in New York City. The University responded favorably, and Schupak’s idea took hold with the cooperation of the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs and Professor William Coplin, who would help shape HSLAPS’s curriculum. The new partnership would allow the high school to offer special courses, including a public policy course modeled on Coplin’s SU course. In addition, SU would provide the school with interns each semester to help teachers and to share their college experiences with the students.

As it happened, the timing was right for Schupak’s idea because the New York City school system was undergoing changes. The prevailing educational theory was to break down the concept of large neighborhood schools because students were falling through the cracks. The system was so overburdened that many schools were forced to hold split sessions, and “that tears the heart out of a school,” Gilligan says. “The idea was to create smaller academic schools that were more like a community.”

The city decided to open about 30 theme schools, but that did not mean elite schools catering only to the best and the brightest. Instead, a democratic process was used to fill the schools, based on eighth-grade reading test scores. Each school was required to have 16 percent of its students among those who achieved above-average test scores; 68 percent, average scores; and 16 percent, below-average scores. “We had the opportunity to accept 50 percent of our students from among those who met the guidelines,” Gilligan says. “The other 50 percent were randomly assigned by lottery.”

There were plenty of problems that first year. For instance, the school was scheduled to open on 15th Street and First Avenue—on the site of the old Stuyvesant High School—but...
the project director resigned before arrangements were completed, leaving the school and students without a building. The displaced school ended up finding space in the same building as the High School for Economics and Finance, next door to the building where HSLAPS is now housed. "We were stepchildren that first year," recalls Gilligan.

For another thing, when students from around the city applied to these special schools, none of them had even heard of HSLAPS, so the school wound up with students nobody else wanted—90 of them, all ninth-graders. Nevertheless, the connection with Syracuse University helped allay some of the fledgling high school students' fears. "Some who decided to come here were very connected to SU, and that's why they came," says Gilligan, whose first role was as an English teacher, one of a total of seven teachers that first year. "We could have been offering Balinese dancing, for all they cared. But they knew that if they were admitted, they might get preferential treatment in terms of earning a scholarship to Syracuse."

First-year problems escalated well beyond those of sharing space with another high school. "Anytime we needed to send a student somewhere, it had to be a ninth-grader," Gilligan recalls with a smile. "This included the Superintendent's Advisory Committee. Our student government president was a ninth-grader; the editor of the school newspaper was a ninth-grader. But these students got in on the ground floor, and the situation influenced our thinking to the point that now we don't believe these positions are solely for seniors."

The next year, a new class was admitted and enrollment doubled to 200 freshmen and sophomores. "We doubled our teaching staff, and we had four floors," Gilligan says. "We also set up a weight room for the kids."

The third year, the school had 300 students—freshmen, sophomores, and juniors—and finally moved into its own building next door, which had previously housed professors from the New York University Leonard N. Stern School of Business. The new building had 14 floors, and presented a com-
pletely different environment for the students. "That first year, when we were on only two floors, we'd see the kids 10 or 15 times a day, so it was easy to spot the goof-offs," says Gilligan. Now each department had its own floor, which was good for sharing ideas among teachers. But it also meant the students could sometimes "get lost" in the building, making it more difficult to keep tabs on them. And there were other things to get used to. "The elevators weren't renovated, and they became entertainment vehicles," Gilligan says. "The students would use them even if they only had to go up or down one floor. And then, because the elevators were old, they'd often get stuck."

Today, those problems are in the past. Now, there are 560 students and 33 teachers, and the problem has changed from one of too few students to too many. This past year, there were 1,400 applications for a freshman class of between 150 and 200. "People have heard of us," Gilligan says.

**MAKING THE GRADE**

One of the biggest drawing cards for potential students is SU's generous offer to grant a scholarship to any HSLAPS student who fulfills certain requirements. Lonnie Morrison, the director of SU's Metropolitan Admissions Program, is the liaison between the main campus admissions office and the high school. Says Morrison: "In part, my responsibility is to come up with guidelines for admissions to the Syracuse University Challenge Program, so students have an idea of what it takes to get into the University. According to our agreement, students are guaranteed admission to the University if they earn a Regents diploma, maintain an 85 average, and score at least 1,100 on the SATs. However, it's not an exact science; we do have some leeway. There are other variables that can compensate. If a student shows leadership qualities, or is involved in community service, we recognize that. We need to be sensitive to those issues in the admissions process and not just be tied into numbers."

If a student doesn't quite meet these qualifications but is still deemed worthy of admission, he or she may be chosen to attend SU's Summer College Program, paid for by the Friends of HSLAPS and SU Trustee James R. Miller '63. The Friends also offer a free laptop computer to any student who is admitted to

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**MENTORING**

Creating Friendships Between Students and Alumni

Jane Werner Present, a 1956 graduate of the College of Arts and Sciences, is chair of the Friends of the High School for Leadership and Public Service. She oversees the SU Mentor-Mentee Alliance (SUMMA), which she recently renamed the Starfish Association in honor of this story:

"I'm saving these starfish from death," he says. "The young man gestures at the vast expanse of beach. "You can't save them all," he protests. "No," says the older man, picking up another starfish. "But I can save this one."

This reflects Present's philosophy. "In New York the disparity between the haves and have-nots grows greater and greater all the time," she says. "It should be like the starfish story—it sounds so patently goofy, but that's the concept of the mentorship program. If one more African American kid trusts one more white person and vice versa, then we've made a difference."

The program works by pairing up an HSLAPS student with an appropriate SU alumni mentor. Students and potential mentors fill out profiles and Present and her staff, including HSLAPS teacher Ann Gilligan, make the matches. Each student who applies to the program must be academically eligible, which means maintaining an 80 average. There have been as many as 55 new mentees in a year. The mentors commit to one year, approximately four hours a month, which includes telephone contact with the students, as well as attending certain social functions with them.
and attends SU, which seems to be a powerful incentive. During the past four years, 19 HSLAPS students have attended SU. Collectively, they have maintained a grade point average of more than 3.0.

What’s also important is that HSLAPS students get a small taste of what it’s like to be in college. In 10th grade, they have a special leadership class; in 11th grade, they have a law class; and in 12th grade, they participate in a government class based on Coplin’s public policy course.

“Overall, the program has been successful,” says Morrison, who also teaches a mandatory course in urban education and school reform to the SU interns who work at the high school. “Obviously there is room for improvement, but the program raises the bar so students have choices that they may not have had before. Alumni participation, and the mentoring that goes along with it, gives these students insight into why a college education is important.”

Coplin, like Morrison, sees the program headed in the right direction. “We’re operating against huge odds and making progress,” he says. “The hardest piece of evidence is that the students who’ve come to SU from HSLAPS are all on track and will probably graduate.”

**IMPRESSIONS OF SU**

Three students—sophomores Matthew Klein and Leslie Stewart and junior Walter Oruam—file into Ann Gilligan’s office to talk about the mentoring program and the trip to Syracuse taken several months earlier. Seated around the table, they can hardly contain themselves when asked about their experiences. “We saw the Dome, and that was very nice,” says Stewart. “Yeah,” Klein adds, “they let us step onto the field.”

But Klein actually seemed more impressed with the dining center in Haven Hall. “It was huge; they had every kind of food you could think of,” he says. “And they had a big circle just filled with desserts.”

“I liked the dorm,” Stewart says. “The feel of it was great. After seeing that, I said, ‘I can’t wait until I go to college.’ The more I saw, the more I wanted to go to Syracuse.” When he returned from the trip, Stewart immediately sought out some SU interns to quiz. “I found out what dorm life is like, what it’s like to be homesick, what the workload is like.”

They all applauded the influence SU has had on their high school and their lives. “I feel like I’ve got some college under my belt and it means I might even have a chance to get into a college,” Oruam says. “This school pushes you toward college. It makes you realize that you have to start now.”

Then, he adds, “In the big picture, Syracuse University has done a lot for this school.”

And, most importantly, Oruam and many of his classmates know a college education is within their reach.

**To Walter Oruam, a junior,**

the mentors are “the best thing ever. They talk to you about everything,” he says. “They’re like a best friend. Mine is in his late 20s, he’s my height, and he owns a comic book company. We chat all the time on the Internet.”

Leslie Stewart, a sophomore, feels much the same. “I see myself in my mentor,” Stewart says. “We talk about his growing up and I can relate. It’s especially important because I’m an only child. He works at Random House publishers and when he found out I was taking the Regents, he sent me all kinds of books to help me study!”

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then we’ve made a difference.”

—Jane Werner Present ’56