

FIRST LEADERSHIP GRADUATES COME HOME

Investment in youth starts to pay

Graduates of a college leadership program are back in the community, helping to make it better and looking for ways to use what they learned.



DREW PERINE/THE NEWS TRIBUNE

The national director of Act Six, Tim Herron, second from right, is thanked by recent graduates during a celebration in May at Union Station in Tacoma. They are, from left, Tara Yi, Michael Chansavang, Sarah Rim and Delia Orosco. The young people are part of the first Act Six graduating class.

BY KAREN HUCKS

The News Tribune

When Michael Chansavang was growing up, the youth group at his East Side church was a comfort to him. The 21-year-old recently returned to Tacoma after graduating from Whitworth College, among the first class of a dozen scholars from a leadership program called Act Six. He was surprised to learn the youth group had disintegrated.

"That sort of broke my heart a little," Chansavang said. "If it weren't for the church, I don't know where I would be. I was pretty much lost."

It just so happened that he was exactly the kind of leader to solve exactly that kind of problem.

He's working with church leaders at Holy Family of Jesus Cambodian Episcopal Church now to revive the group. He's also spending part of the summer as a camp

counselor at Lister Elementary for the Northwest Leadership Foundation.

"Now I know I'm supposed to be here," said Chansavang, a Lincoln High graduate. "I know I'm doing something good for the church, for the community."

Chansavang is one of 12 Act Six scholars who graduated in May from Whitworth College. They were the first graduates of the Northwest Leadership Foundation initiative, which in 2003 started giving full tuition scholarships to the Spokane college to young leaders from the Tacoma area.

Act Six has lofty goals.

Director Tim Herron doesn't just want to transform motivated teens into college graduates.

It's "not just to help them get their degrees, but to really transform the city," Herron said. "Our vision is really to inspire them to care about their community."

Although they aren't required to return home after graduation, Herron hopes they will.

Most of the dozen are back in the Tacoma area, looking for jobs.

"I plan on staying in Tacoma," said communications major Holy Chea, who went to Henry Foss High School. "It has made me value Tacoma even more. It made me have a passion for this city."

STICKING TOGETHER

Herron was a math teacher at Lincoln in the early 2000s when he noticed some of his best students weren't getting through college.

"We had these great, promising students that we were sending off, and they were just not making it," Herron said.

So he started Act Six, based on a philosophy articulated by the Posse Foundation nearly 20 years ago on the East Coast.

The idea is that if students have preparation and each other, they're more likely to make it.

Act Six takes its name from the Bible's Book of Acts, in which the church responded to inequality in food distribution by selecting a cadre of leaders and empowering them to help solve the problem.

The initiative has a simple strategy of recruiting cadres of about 10 students, who already are promising leaders, during their senior year of high school.

They meet each week during their senior year of high school and talk about everything from study skills and time management to race relations and community development. They visit their college campus twice. They do a couple of retreats, even climbing a 9,000-foot mountain together.

Then, in teams, they go to faith-based colleges.

Whitworth College in Spokane has been the only college so far, but that will change.

This fall, Pacific Lutheran University in Parkland will accept six Act Six scholars who will start college in 2008. The following year, Northwest University in Kirkland will join. The program already has affiliates in Tennessee, Oregon and Alaska.

Although past students have been from the Tacoma area only, the program is expanding to include Seattle-area students.

Act Six leaders hope it grows.

"I hope a number of faith-based colleges will take a look at what's going on," associate director Kenneth Young said. "My vision is it does go across America."

Forty of the 41 Act Six scholars from four cadres are still in school or just graduated.

All 11 members of the first cadre, as well as one member of the second, graduated in May with Bachelor of Arts degrees in subjects ranging from international studies to biology.

Act Six lost one student in the second cadre for academic reasons, so Herron knows the success rate won't always be perfect, but he expects it to stay above 90

percent. That's significantly better than the national statistics that show college graduation rates of black and Hispanic students at well under 50 percent.

Act Six students don't need to be minorities or low-income or first-generation college students, but most are.

"We definitely have a bias toward students who are underrepresented on college campuses, and that comes in many forms, in race and income level and first generation," Herron said. "But the main thing is we're looking for kids who care about leadership and have a heart for their community and for being bridges."



DREW PERINE/THE NEWS TRIBUNE

Fa'ana Fanene is introduced at a celebration for Act Six graduates at Tacoma's Union Station in May. She received a degree in English from Whitworth College.

MAKING THEIR PLACE

Act Six isn't good just for the students or their cities. The graduates helped transform a campus in need of diversity.

"Whitworth took a big risk," Herron said. "It's paid off beautifully."

At Whitworth, where the noncaucasian enrollment in 2006-07 was 14.2 percent, Act Six students created new conversations about race, privilege and leadership.

They were leaders on their campus – which is exactly what Act Six told them to be.

One student, Rogers High School graduate Fa'ana Fanene, was elected president of the Associated Students of Whitworth College for the 2006-07 school year. Sha'Nay McQuirter, who went to Mount Tahoma High School, started the college's first gospel choir, and grew it to 60 students, most of them singing gospel for the first time.

Delia Orosco, who went to Foss, served homeless teens in downtown Spokane through Whitworth's Street Kids Project.

Lauren Thompson, also a Foss student, organized the Black History Month exhibit for the campus in 2006. She became the secretary and then president of the Black Student Union. She also worked in the school's admissions department, helping with diversity events.

Several students made a two-hour presentation in 2006 to the college faculty about how the college could improve the academic environment for under-represented students.

At first, Spokane was a culture shock, students said.

Bobby Walston, another Lincoln grad, said other students would say, "Oh, you're black. Do you rap? Do you play basketball? Can you teach me how to dance?"

The students knew they had to be careful about how they reacted if they wanted to make real changes.

"You didn't want to go in puffed up like 'We're Act Six and we're here to save your campus,'" Thompson said.

By the end of their freshman year, the students had started to figure out where and how they could lead.

Chansavang said his talents were in the classroom, asking nearly nonstop questions.

Holy Chea lent his leadership skills to youth in Spokane, teaching hip-hop to kids at a dance studio.

Bobby Walston worked in admissions and in the residence hall, at the library and as a teaching assistant for a professor.

They made their place.



LUI KIT WONG/THE NEWS TRIBUNE
Act Six graduate Daniel Bacon and Michael Ha, 9, battle for a basketball last week at Lister Elementary School in Tacoma.

BIG INVESTMENT

The investment colleges make in Act Six isn't small.

The six students PLU is planning to admit as the first cadre there will cost \$60,000 to \$100,000 a year.

Each student comes to school with whatever resources they can garner, and then the college pays the rest. At a minimum, their tuition is covered without any loans. Depending on a student's need, the schools could also fund books, room, food and personal expenses.

About half the students have been Washington State Achievers, bringing \$10,000-a-year scholarships from the Gates Foundation and College Success Foundation. About half of the students also have \$4,000-a-year scholarships from the R. Merle Palmer Minority Scholarship Foundation.

Karl Stumo, vice president for admission and enrollment services at PLU, said he's excited to join Act Six, both to serve students and to make the campus a better place.

"This program, I think, picks students one at a time and builds the capacity in each one of them to go out and change Tacoma, one person and one project at a time," he said. "It might take some time to transform the city, but these kids can do that."

Daniel Bacon, an Act Six and a Lincoln High graduate who's working with Chansavang as a camp counselor, said knowing the other members of his cadre is a comfort.

"I know they're out there," said Bacon, who will work for AmeriCorps for the next two years on the Hilltop. "I know overall, they want to see the world change and the community change."

ON THE WEB AT:

<http://www.thenewstribune.com/news/education/story/106461.html>

Tacoma reaps a fine crop of college graduates

THE NEWS TRIBUNE

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Four years ago, a seed was planted when the first cadre of Tacoma's Act Six students went off to Whitworth College in Spokane on full-ride scholarships.

That seed has flowered beautifully. Twelve students – most of them minorities or low-income – graduated in May. Most have returned to Tacoma, ready to go to work and contribute to their community.

That's exactly what Act Six director Tim Herron hopes the program – an initiative of the Northwest Leadership Foundation – will accomplish. As he told The News Tribune's Karen Hucks, Act Six's goal is about more than helping young people succeed at a participating faith-based college: "Our vision is really to inspire them to care about their community."

The strategy behind the Act Six Leadership and Scholarship Initiative is that if students go off to college as a well-prepared team whose members provide support for each other, they're more likely to succeed – even at a school with little ethnic diversity like Whitworth.

Selected as high school seniors who already showed leadership potential, the students met weekly during their last year of high school to discuss such topics as study skills, time management, race relations and community development. They visited the Whitworth campus twice and participated in team-building exercises.

That preparation paid off. They made a splash at Whitworth, stepping into leadership roles that included student body president and starting the college's first gospel choir. All 11 of the first group and one from the 2004 cadre earned degrees.

Now they're home, with those degrees and a sense of accomplishment that are sure to translate into the kind of success that might have eluded them had it not been for a program like Act Six. Forty more of the program's college students are in the pipeline to graduate, and it is putting out the call for up to 20 applicants for the Fall 2008 cadre.

Tacoma is fortunate to have a program like Act Six working to help young people succeed. Participating colleges like Whitworth – and Pacific Lutheran University next year – contribute greatly by paying student expenses that aren't covered by scholarships such as those provided by the Gates Foundation.

Few factors are likely to help the city more than increasing its number of college graduates – especially those from less-advantaged neighborhoods.

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<http://www.thenewstribune.com/opinion/editorials/story/109116.html>

The Oregonian

Helping our future leaders up the ladder

Wednesday, May 24, 2006

Singing sensation Julianne Johnson is one of Portland's best-known musical treasures.

And yet without a much-needed hand up and the right community support, she might not have been able to create her international singing, film and theater career.



S. RENEE MITCHELL

"We were barely, barely middle class," says Johnson, who grew up in inner North Portland. Her Texas family migrated to Oregon during World War II. "They prided themselves on trying to get their kids educated. So that was the legacy passed down to me."

Once she landed at the University of Portland on a music scholarship, Johnson was given money by community-based organizations. She also had faculty members who looked out for her.

One of her mentors, Johnson says, "knew the way for me to be successful in my field was to open my eyes to more than my neighborhood. . . . That's when I knew my place in the world. I've never seen anything differently since that point."

But times have changed since the late 1970s. Fewer people of color, especially black and Latino men, are choosing college, the best gateway to economic and cultural success.

A good portion of students of color are not even academically ready to take that step -- or stay there. What's more, not only has tuition gone up, but so has the interest on federal loans, now up to 8.5 percent, starting in July.

But at least 10 high school graduates each year will get the opportunity of a lifetime: a free ride to four years of college, at a cost of \$120,000 each. What's more, each student will get \$2,000 to travel overseas for three weeks with a college professor.

So get your pencils ready. Applications for the Act Six program are being accepted through Oct. 17. (See more information at www.actsix.org.)

The nonprofit is faith-based, but students are accepted from all religious backgrounds. It is also open to any ethnic group. So far, though, at least half of the Act Six participants in Tacoma and Memphis, Tenn., are black. More than 80 percent are low income, and most are the first in their families to attend college.

To increase retention, Act Six works with its scholarship recipients a year before they get to college to make them academically ready. The program continues to provide leadership development opportunities until the students graduate.

The mission of Act Six is that if it finds diamonds in the rough and buffs them up a bit, the college students will become actively engaged in their communities now and in the future.

That certainly has held true for Johnson, who has donated her talent to a number of charities, large and small. She has taught music in Portland's public schools, and she often performs -- and has recorded CDs -- with pianist Michael Allen Harrison.

Now, Johnson, the new local director of Act Six, is responsible for finding promising high school seniors who deserve a free college education.

"I have an Oprah job," Johnson says, laughing.

Act Six partners only with faith-based colleges. The one that has stepped up so far is George Fox University in Newberg. (I received my MBA from there a few years ago.) The small, Christian-based school is one of 10 independent colleges that recently committed to increasing lagging diversity numbers.

Separate from Act Six, the Oregon Independent College Foundation recently announced a \$1 million fundraising campaign to recruit and retain students of color at the state's smaller liberal-arts colleges, including Reed College and Marylhurst University. "Any college education is a great thing; it doesn't matter where you go," says Britt Davis, president of the foundation (www.oicf.org). But, he adds, "these are environments where students don't drop through the cracks."

As graduation nears, it's important that our students are exposed to lots of choices to find their place in the world. Maybe Act Six, at least for some, hits just the right note.

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Spokane-area students selected for full scholarships

Kevin Graman / The Spokesman-Review

Tags: [Gonzaga Un](#) [Meklit Kalebessa](#) [whitworth university](#)



Meklit Kalebessa, of Lewis and Clark High School, is one of the students involved in the Act Six Leadership and Scholarship Initiative. The first cadre of eight Spokane students will join 35 students from the Puget Sound region to receive full-tuition, full-need scholarships to five Washington colleges.

Spokane-area students

The Spokane-area Act Six Leadership and Scholarship Initiative students will be recognized at a celebration tonight at 7 at Lewis and Clark High School:

Gonzaga University

Jasmine Linane-Booey, Shadle Park High School

Oscar Marmolejo, University High School

Edwin Torres, Gonzaga Preparatory School

Thuy-Anh Vo, Gonzaga Preparatory School

Whitworth University

Meklit Kalebessa, Lewis and Clark High School

Darrien Mack, Rogers High School

Taylor Powell, Shadle Park High School

Jaime Rebuella, Riverside High School

students who care about their communities and want to bring the lessons they learn in college back home.

Kalebessa was an ideal candidate.

A native of Ethiopia, her family immigrated to Spokane when she was in third grade. She studied English as a second language until her freshman year at LC.

Meklit Kalebessa never imagined that she would be just the type of student Whitworth University was looking for.

In fact, the Lewis and Clark High School senior didn't see a four-year college in her future at all, much less a private college of Whitworth's stature.

But last week, Kalebessa was named one of 43 students who will receive full-tuition, full-need scholarships to five Washington colleges.

The students were chosen by the Act Six Leadership and Scholarship Initiative, after a rigorous selection process evaluating their leadership potential and for the ethnic and social diversity each will bring to the largely white, affluent student bodies.

"Act Six is specifically targeting underrepresented leaders," said Tim Herron, Act Six director for the Northwest Leadership Foundation, a faith-based nonprofit organization based in Tacoma. Students of all races are invited to apply, but the program seeks out applicants who will add "new perspectives and voices to campus."

The foundation began the program in 2002 as a way of recruiting Whitworth students from Tacoma's low-income neighborhoods. Herron, at the time a teacher at Lincoln High School, says he had seen far too many students go off to college only to drop out.

With the recent addition of a Spokane office of the foundation, this year eight Spokane students were chosen for fall admission. Four will attend Whitworth and four will attend Gonzaga University, which just joined the program.

Rodney McAuley, Act Six Spokane director, said he envisions the number of Spokane students increasing as the economy recovers. The program is looking for

She volunteers at Sacred Heart Medical Center and wants to pursue a career in health care administration.

Kalebessa said she can't wait to begin Whitworth in the fall.

"It is unbelievable," she said. "I was thinking of a community college."

She feels she would not have had this opportunity without three special women in her life – a family friend who bought her first books in English, a counselor who guided her toward college, and her mother, who worked night shifts at a nursing home to support three children.

This will be Whitworth's seventh group of Act Six students since the program was launched, Herron said.

The Act Six program not only carefully selects applicants, it prepares them for college and supports them while they are there.

As a result, 90 percent of the 67 students originally selected for the program have graduated or are still enrolled, a graduation and retention rate much higher than the national averages.

Among the Spokane Act Six students to attend Gonzaga is Jasmine Linane-Booey, a Shadle Park senior, who wants to become a high school counselor.

"I've always wanted to work with kids," Linane-Booey said. "My first job was in a child care."

She considers herself "blessed" to receive the scholarship.

Gonzaga will determine what the families of the Act Six scholars can contribute, according to Julie McCulloh, dean of admissions.

"If the family has zero contributions, we will cover everything," McCulloh said. That could amount to more than \$36,000 per student, including a minimum tuition of \$29,200.

Whitworth will pay tuition, which is \$27,100 this year. Then the college will cover room and board, books and expenses based on each student's need, which could amount to more than \$11,400.

So far, Herron said, the program has succeeded in its goal of producing leaders, both on campus and back in the community. Two of the last three student body presidents at Whitworth have been Act Six scholars.

"They really have been involved in every aspect of campus life," Herron said. "Three-quarters of them are back in their home communities doing significant work."

One is teaching for the Teach for America program, four are serving AmeriCorps, one is managing the genetics research lab at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York and another works for the Chicago Center for Urban Life and Culture, Herron said.

The other Washington colleges participating in Act Six are Pacific Lutheran University, Northwest University and Trinity Lutheran College.

McCulloh added that Gonzaga was looking for just such a collaboration.

"We were looking for a program that would help us become more diverse, in all senses," she said. "It's in keeping with the Jesuit social justice mission."

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