

“It takes a village to raise a child,” the old proverb says. And getting a child to college takes just that—everyone.

The Village is the families, the educators, the counselors, the youth workers, and the other community members within and beyond our schools—everybody who comprise the potential support system in a student’s life.

The Village is the external force that reflects or rejects what students think about themselves and their prospects for college and life well beyond it.

At its best, the Village reminds students that college is a crucial and collective venture; one that they do not have to navigate alone.

The Counselor
Neomia



“There’s this myth that everyone wants to escape Eastern Kentucky, that everybody wants to get out and never go back. For a lot of students, that’s not true.”

I had always been pretty academically inclined as a student, and I had watched my brothers and my sister attempt to go to college and not finish. And so, early on, I didn't know what college was going to do for me.

In Knott County, there were six of us African-Americans in grade school, and we were all family. I had cousins, and I have two sisters and a brother. My sister had actually gone to the University of Kentucky and returned after a year. It was just so difficult on her financially, socially. She had a hard time fitting in and finding her place. Then my brother, he went to Alice Lloyd College for a couple of years, and he struggled there. He dropped out and enlisted in the military.

When I was in eighth grade though, a lot of things happened in my life. I joined speech and debate in my middle school, and I won a state championship that year. Then I lost a lot of weight because I had always been overweight as a child. I was getting more confident. And then one day, we were sitting at the school, and this guy came in from UK, and he started talking about this brand new program called Robinson Scholars.

It was important what he was saying, but for me, it was even more important who he was because he was an African-American male. I had never seen in my school system, or anywhere around me, an African-American male who had obtained a bachelor's degree or a degree of any type. Instantly, I was attracted to that because of what he represented for me and the possibility.

My family's been in Knott County forever. The area where we lived was actually land that was granted to some slaves following the Civil War and the emancipation of slaves. It was granted to my ancestors, and so we stayed there and worked the land. And

that's where my family stayed and lived. I've always been surrounded by family and by friends and had a large extended family growing up.

In Knott, the African-American community is pretty tiny. There's about four different families, so a total of about twenty-five to thirty African-American students. In some ways, the racial dynamic has changed, and in some ways not. I wouldn't necessarily say it's acceptable now, but it's tolerable now. It's one of those things where growing up, you have to acclimate to your environment. You have to learn to be a little bit of a chameleon.

I can't say anybody that I knew was rich. You had your families that were better off, that had more say-so in the school system, that had more say-so within the community. You have your students who come from the "bad" families, and everybody knows who they are and what they do. Growing up, I didn't think we were super poor, but that was relative to what everyone else had around us. Being an adult now and looking back on that, we were pretty poor!

My mother got married at sixteen, and she did not have a high school diploma, and so she went back and she got her GED (General Education Degree). And she worked a job making \$3.50 an hour all the way while I was growing up. My father, he had what was considered a good job. He worked for the power company. So that was our income. They were raising four kids on basically his salary. So we had enough to have a home and to always be fed and to always be clothed, but it was financially a struggle growing up.

When I went to Knott County High School, it was two floors, in the shape of an H with a huge gym attached—you know how Eastern Kentucky schools usually have their big gyms. It was not very racially diverse. All of the staff were white, mainly female. I would say we had about 150 to 200 people in my class. Everyone knows everyone's business, where they're going and what they're doing. And everybody's parents know. It was close-knit. It was very segregated in terms of what groups you hung out with, and there were very clear labels of who was with who. It was very rigid, politically and socially.

In high school, I didn't experience a lot of racism. My brother did. It was very difficult for him. But mine was more in middle grades. There was my cousin Josh, my cousin Becky, and Kenya. We were all in the same class together, and my cousin Josh and I got in a fight. The teacher came up to us and said, "That's the problem. We can't put any of you niggers in a classroom together."

Absolutely, she said that!

And it was a huge issue. My mother came in. So did the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). The teacher wasn't fired. She wasn't reprimanded or any of that. She still taught. She taught one of my younger cousins, and she told her that she couldn't go outside and play at recess because she was "too dark already."

At the same time I had teachers like her, I had others that challenged me, made me think, and were very accepting and did a lot of things that brought about cultural awareness. We never learned about black history in school. That wasn't taught to us. I had one teacher who taught about those kinds of things and who brought individuals from different cultures in to speak with us. But other than that—high school, middle school—it was a missing part of history for me.

So I was in high school. I was doing speech and debate, and I had applied to Robinson at UK and gotten accepted. It was a pretty big deal because it was the first time that it had been done. I went to my first summer camp, and I met incredible people. I loved the camp, but I loved the people that I met. I actually met my husband at that first summer camp and some of the people who are still my best friends to this day.

There was the high school component, and then there was the college component. So the high school component was we'd have periodic meetings. People would come visit us at school. They'd check in on us. They were grooming us to be ready. During the summer, we would be with other Robinson Scholars and visit college campuses and just get acclimated to being a college student and also do some career readiness, ACT

workshops, that kind of thing to get us ready, to be accepted, to be a member of the community.

We stayed at UK for three weeks, and it was then that I discovered, *Hey, this is a real place. This is somewhere where I can learn and feel comfortable. This is somewhere where I can get educated.*

At Robinson, I got a community. Despite the many things UK offers to students, you still, when you come to UK, have to have internal drive because it is a big university. So you, yourself, have to be able to ask for help, to seek opportunities. I don't believe without having that community of people surrounding me that I would have been able to do that.

I came to UK with a group of people that I already knew, that I was already comfortable with. I was able to have a sound foundation, a platform that I could move out from. I definitely would have gotten myself in a world of trouble if I hadn't had that family that supported me.

When we got to campus, at that time, there were two dedicated individuals who worked with us and worked with our secondary advisors, and we met with them a lot. We would have monthly meetings with them, and then we would have small group meetings every other month where we would come together and discuss issues we were having. So they were just a check point to make sure we were doing okay, to see what we were doing. I still talk to the director to this day, periodically. They were our parents while we were on campus! They weren't invasive, but at the same time, they wanted to make sure we were doing what we needed to do.

For me, coming to UK was exciting. For me, it was a chance for freedom and to push myself. I came in with a perspective as I had spent time on the campus before. So it was somewhere that felt comfortable to me, and there were people there that I knew.

Now, when I got to campus, being on a real campus, not just for the summer, it was very different. Even though I had my group of friends with me, I still sometimes felt a

little bit isolated. There was this sense of me always being inferior; I always felt inferior on campus. And partly, it was because I spoke with an accent.

Teachers made comments about it. If I said anything that seemed relatively intelligent, they seemed shocked. That's not something I faced alone. I faced adversity because I was African-American, but more so, I acutely felt that I was Appalachian.

It's not necessarily acceptable to make fun of someone because of their skin color or their ethnicity, but I feel like with my being Appalachian, it's open season. It's just a culture really of feeling other. I didn't just feel other by individuals who were white on campus or those who were more educated than I was or from different places, but by the African-American community. I didn't come from their background. I didn't speak like them, but I also wasn't white. It was just a really awkward place to be, and the only place that I did feel comfortable was with those people that I knew and that understood me and understood the culture that I came from. We would have those conversations together about these different issues that we were facing.

One of my best friends was Afrilachian (African-American and Appalachian). She was there at the same time as I was. She and I are still very close friends. But she experienced the same thing. It was probably the most challenging thing in my life. To go from a point where I felt that I was at the absolute top of my game—I excelled in my academics, did well in my activities, and had a scholarship to what I considered the best university in the state—and then to come here and to feel absolutely like I was at the bottom of the totem pole, like I was not of value here.

Robinson became my refuge. It was where my friends were. I could speak freely. It's where people understood what I had to say and how I was saying it because they were having the same experiences that I was.

Now I work in college counseling. I know from my work as a counselor that Lexington is such a different environment for our students. First, they go home for that comfort of family, the comfort of the environment. And a lot of students come from circumstances in which their families rely on them. For health care for elderly family

members, for brothers and sisters, and they may have a farm that they have to help their parents work, and so they have to go home. Their parents, having not experienced college themselves, don't understand that college is a seven-day-a-week kind of endeavor. They're used to an environment where school goes from Monday to Friday, and your weekends are free for family and friends or for your extracurriculars. So their understanding is: "Okay, you're done with class. You can come home and be with us now."

There's this myth that everyone wants to escape Eastern Kentucky, that everybody wants to get out and never go back. For a lot of students, that's not true. They want to be able to get an education and take it back. Home is something that's very important to us. It's embedded. It's a place that we love. Our family structures are so strong that homesickness is a real issue for our students.

I believe there's a financial component, there's an academic readiness component, and then there's also a socially-ready component that goes with it. They all have to be paid equal attention to. Sometimes, there's only a focus on those students who get thirty-ones on their ACT, that sometimes those students who are getting a twenty are really ignored. And a certain aspect of those thirty-one students are ignored. In my experience, the high-achieving students that come in are students that I, as an advisor, have had the absolute most difficulty with. Because they're academically competent, but at the same time, they're not socially competent.

In college, it's about navigating your social world as well as your academic world. For those students, they come in thinking they're ready. But some of those students in high school were not really challenged and so, they approach college the same way they did high school. They don't know how to study. They don't know how to manage their time because they've usually had a parent who has managed everything for them. And so, they fall behind. The students that I see be successful in college are typically those who score a twenty-two or twenty-three on the ACT, who know that they have to work a little bit, who have learned to manage themselves throughout the time they were in high school. You can just sort of let them go and let them do what they need to do with the social support.

Academics in college are important, but we've focused too much on academics. In order for students to succeed, we have to remember that they are individuals. They have different personal issues and things that they come to college with and things that they bring to the table.

The average ACT score of our students is a twenty-five and the range is from a thirty down to a nineteen. All of those students are doing well. They just needed somebody to believe in them and support them, to counter those other things that are going on.

These are the kids that are moving the numbers.

You can't change the outlook of Kentucky, and you can't change the economic reality of Kentucky unless every student is being touched. At this point in time, especially in the Appalachian region, every student that is not being supported academically and socially, that's another student that's going to become a statistic. If we want a better Commonwealth, we really need to invest in every child.

My official position now is program coordinator for Robinson Scholars. We have about three hundred students in the high school program in twenty-nine Eastern Kentucky counties, and then we have about 120 students on the UK college campus.

I also work as the speech and debate coach at Dunbar High School. I did speech all through high school. After I graduated college, I did nanny for a little while and realized that I did graduate college, so maybe I need to do something different than be a nanny. It was a great experience and all, but I wanted to be a little more impactful.

COLLEGE TRIPWIRES

READY OR NOT

Stories from the Students Behind the Statistics



With a Foreword from

Dr. Vicki Phillips

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