

Summer Search puts teens on soul-searching path

Program aims to provide tools for life

Chanel Hill Tribune Staff Writer - Jun 19, 2018



Sylvia McKinney is the executive director of Summer Search Philadelphia, where the program got its start in 2006. — PHOTO BY ABDUL SULAYMAN/TRIBUNE CHIEF PHOTOGRAPHER

For more than 25 years, Summer Search, a national college success program, has provided mentorship, college counseling and experiential opportunities to help students bolster their skills and build confidence to succeed.

Established initially in 1990 by Linda Mornell, the program aims to provide students from low-income backgrounds with the opportunity to transform themselves into college-educated leaders who give back to their families and communities.

Summer Search got its start in Philadelphia in 2006 and has since expanded to have chapters in the San Francisco, Seattle, Boston and New York City areas.

“Paul Tough, author of ‘How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and Hidden Power of Character,’ writes that with the right support, children who grow up in the most painful circumstances can go on to achieve amazing things when given the right support,” said Sylvia McKinney, executive director of Summer Search Philadelphia. “What Summer Search does is provide support to children from low-income communities so that they can achieve those amazing things.

“Our program operates year-round, but we realize that academic success can be influenced both inside and outside of the classroom,” she added. “The unique blend of mentors, summer experiential learning programs, college access supports, and in-college guidance, provides Philadelphia students with a comprehensive range of tools to be successful.”

Since 2006, Summer Search Philadelphia has served 249 students and currently has a partnership with five schools: Boys Latin, Mariana Bracetti Academy, Olney Charter High School, KIPP Charter and Bodine High School for International Affairs.

The student-mentor relationship is at the heart of the program’s experience. The one-on-one mentoring model begins in a student’s sophomore year and continues through college matriculation.

“While we already have great partnerships with five schools, we’re looking to partner with more schools,” McKinney said. “We would love to partner with schools in the district.

“We do think that there are a lot more students who can benefit from our services,” she added. “With each student, we provide a circle of support that is customized for every student. At the same time, our mentoring is helping students understand themselves while preparing them for their future.”

Summer Search sends students on two summer trips during their sophomore and junior years of high school. The goal of the excursions is to take the teenagers away from the familiar so that they can develop resilience and leadership skills.

“We start the program with students who are in the 10th grade,” McKinney said. “They will start the program with a wilderness expedition. During the expedition, students are away from technology completely. They do a 3-mile run, learn how to canoe and go white water rafting.

“During their junior year, we talk about what students want to do after high school whether that is college, the military or a career,” she added. “The second trip is geared more toward their needs. For example, if a student wants to be an artist, we will take them somewhere that will help them flourish as an artist.

“During their senior year, we work with the students, their parents, and school to talk to them about financial aid and other federal forms. These life changing experiences provide students the opportunity to widen their world views, take healthy risks, discover their strength, and master new skills.”

Cesar Cortorreal Jr. has been a part of the program since he was a student at Olney Charter High School. Now a junior at Franklin and Marshall College, Cortorreal said he learned a lot from participating in the program.

“I used to be a quiet person who didn’t believe in myself,” Cortorreal said. “Summer Search allowed me to learn more about myself and from that came confidence. The camping trip put things into perspective for me. It helped me find what I’m interested in and who I am as a person.

“The program has taught me that I can do anything that I set my mind to,” he added. “I believe in paying it forward, so I want to mentor others and give back. This program changed me and I want to give that same opportunity to someone else.”

Cortorreal, who is majoring in sociology and cultural anthropology, will be working at Summer Search for two months during his summer break.

“I’ve been keeping a busy schedule this summer,” Cortorreal said. “I was recently in China and India. I’ll be working with Summer Search in June and August. Some of the students in Summer Search will be going abroad soon, so I’ll be helping them prepare for that trip.

“In July, I’ll be a part of the F&M’s College prep program,” he added. “That program is a three-week college immersion experience for rising high school seniors. The students will be taught classes and they will be staying on campus. I’ll be teaching a class for that as well as helping the students write their college essays. I’m looking forward to helping all of these students this summer.”

McKinney said that she’s always looking for new ways to enhance the Philadelphia component. She recently started Education Talks, which allows the program to partner with influential leaders in the region who care about positive development of children from low-income communities.

“The goal for the Education Talks is to have leaders in the city talk about education and their careers through their own personal journey,” McKinney said. “These talks will be for the community. It will be a place to network and learn. Our first inaugural talk will take place in October.

“We’re also in strategic planning of career development, internships and career readiness as being our next level of support for our young people,” she added. “We’re constantly looking for different ways to give students the best opportunities possible through our program.”

http://www.phillytrib.com/lifestyle/summer-search-puts-teens-on-soul-searching-path/article_bcc256ff-98cf-5acc-a236-81e3fe1b2f10.html



Summer Search Philadelphia mentor Tolu Olatade talks with Boys Latin junior Za'Quir Jones.
— PHOTO BY ABDUL SULAYMAN/TRIBUNE CHIEF PHOTOGRAPHER



Summer Search college student Robert Luckain-Rowi, left, is pictured with mentor Alex Cromer, executive director Sylvia McKinney as well as mentors Tolu Olatade and Kaitlin Irvine. — PHOTO BY ABDUL SULAYMAN/TRIBUNE CHIEF PHOTOGRAPHER



Summer Search students get a photo op with Philadelphia Eagles player Chris Long, who donated a portion of his income to support the local program.

— PHOTO BY PAUL COKER