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‘I see a lot of potential that they don’t see in themselves yet.’

HARRIET LEWIS, *chairwoman of the Lewis Family Foundation, which funds the Next Generation Leaders program*

Building their confidence before college



PHOTOS BY ERIN CLARK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

From left: Nathalie Diaz-Troncoso, Joshua Curtiss, and Katherine Bernardes in the office of Grand Circle Corp. in Boston.

Summer internship program focuses on leadership, success

By Brian MacQuarrie
GLOBE STAFF

Joshua Curtiss of South Boston zig-zagged across a patch of dirt this summer as he tried to capture a goat, a circus-like chase that the 19-year-

old found both amusing and frightening during an eye-opening trip to remote areas of Kenya and Tanzania.

“I didn’t know if it’d attack me or what,” Curtiss recalled with a smile.

Corraling an animal that doesn’t want to be caught won’t be on the curriculum at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, where Curtiss will be a freshman this fall. But the leadership program that brought him to East Africa — goat chasing included — has given him new confidence that he can make the transition to college from

Urban Science Academy in West Roxbury.

College success for Boston students is at the core of Next Generation Leaders, a program created in 2007 by travel entrepreneur Harriet Lewis that sent Curtiss and nine others on the brink of college to Africa for two weeks.

Their journey capped a summer-long internship at Grand Circle Corp., a global travel company owned by Lewis and her husband, Alan, that is based in the Seaport. The students are placed in challenging jobs that emphasize team building, risk taking,



PHOTO BY ERIN CLARK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Harriet Lewis, a former special education teacher in the Boston school system, said the work students do is not “stuffing envelopes.”

and communication, Lewis said.

“It’s tough with a lot of love,” said Lewis, the chairwoman of the Lewis Family Foundation, which funds the program. “I see a lot of potential that they don’t see in themselves yet.”

That potential is yielding results. Ninety-three percent of the 88 students who have completed the Next Generation program — mostly from Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan — have graduated from four-year colleges and universities or are on track to complete their studies, Lewis said.

Citywide, Boston Public Schools reported that 54 percent of its Class of 2017 intended to attend four-year colleges. A 2018 report found that 38 percent of the 2011 graduating class received a college degree within six years, 14 percentage points higher than the Class of 2000.

Katherine Bernardez, an 18-year-old from Dorchester who will attend the University of Massachusetts Amherst, said that once-distant horizons are now within her reach.

“I had been very indecisive,” said Bernardez, whose parents immigrated to the United States as young adults from Honduras. “Now, I am able to trust my gut. All the self-doubting I had before is basically

out the window.”

Bernardez, who graduated from City on a Hill Charter School in Roxbury, worked in marketing for adventure travel at Grand Circle before the group trip to East Africa.

“My mom wants me to go through with my dreams. I don’t want to let her down,” Bernardez said. “It’s not just where you come from. No matter where you come from, there’s talent.”

The program seeks talent through a competitive application process that includes essays and interviews, said Juma Crawford, president of the Lewis Family Foundation.

“We’re looking for young people who can be stretched and pushed and probably hadn’t been,” Crawford said. “We’re really looking for young people who have a hunger to be leaders.”

Leadership skills are honed with a hefty dose of problem-solving and accountability, he said. The students rotate as team leaders in Africa, for example, and are placed in complicated situations where they must find solutions while the adults who accompany them remain in the background.

“We will drop them in the middle of a market and say, ‘We need these eight things.’ They have to figure it out. If we don’t get

these things, we won’t be able to feed 400 children at a school,” Crawford said. “Get comfortable being uncomfortable.”

At their summer jobs, the students are given regular performance reviews. The work fills actual corporate needs, Lewis said, and interns can be fired if they do not meet their goals or follow guidelines.

“It’s not stuffing envelopes here,” said Lewis, a former special education teacher in the Boston school system. “We don’t sugarcoat anything. We do not baby.”

The summer’s lessons are designed to stay with the students long after they have moved on to college.

“When push comes to shove, one of the biggest challenges, particularly with students of color, is to self-advocate, ask for help, and speak up when they need support,” Crawford said. “You have a voice. You have to use that voice.”

Nathalie Diaz-Troncoso, an 18-year-old from Roxbury who will attend Connecticut College this fall, said she has learned to speak up.

“I’m a girl from the projects. By coming here, I’ve learned I’m talented,” said Diaz-Troncoso, who graduated from Boston Latin Academy and wants to become an immigration lawyer.

“Nothing has ever pushed me this hard,” added Diaz-Troncoso, the daughter of Dominican immigrants. “It’s made me a more open person. I’ve really left myself open and let people in.”

Some Next Generation students had never been away from home before the program, certainly nowhere as exotic as Africa. But their day-to-day life in Boston can often be more impactful than the far-flung travels of more privileged freshmen, Lewis said.

“You have different experiences, and they’re very valuable,” she tells the students.

Many times, bringing that value to light takes a blunt mix of uncoddled pushing and knowing persuasion.

“There is nothing light and fluffy about this program, but it is a lot of fun,” Lewis said. “I still call myself a teacher. We want them to learn how to lead.”

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