

LOCAL & REGION

Guardian Scholar program lifts lives through education

Youth Foundation program helps youth graduate from college

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EAGLE COUNTY — Guardian Scholars change lives. Those lives change other lives, and the world improves.

Take Justine Henderson and Jenni Adams, this year's Guardian Scholars.

Henderson has been on her own since her father left when she was 13.

Adams spent her formative years watching cancer take her mother by inches. She's been on her own ever since.

Henderson graduated from Eagle Valley High School on Saturday and will attend the University of Denver. After she graduates she plans to work with kids going through what she has.

Adams is headed to Mesa State College as a Guardian Scholar. Her plan is to study early childhood education and dance, and live abroad.

"I believe with the help of the Guardian Scholars, I will be able to reach the stars, achieve my dreams, and overcome the obstacle of living parentless," Adams said.

Henderson says she lived outside society and was not willing to ask for help; she was embarrassed about being homeless and tried to hide it. Kids from dysfunctional families often turned to alcohol or drugs. She didn't go down that road.

"I hope to raise awareness and offer support to teenagers who are most likely not going to get adopted, but still need some sense of family and support," Henderson said. "These kids are often overlooked and fall through society's cracks. I want to be the person who changes this, and receiving the Guardian Scholarship will help me do it."

About Guardian Scholars

The Guardian Scholars is a program of the Youth Foundation, helping disadvantaged youth graduate from college.

The students come from what we'll call "challenging" backgrounds. Some have parents, some don't. Some are homeless; many are from foster homes.

None had the financial resources and emotional support for college.

Now they do.

The money is provided through the scholarship program. Then they're surrounded with a family of college advisors, the Youth Foundation, donors and mentors.



SPECIAL TO THE DAILY
Justine Henderson, left, and Jenni Adams will attend college this fall as Guardian Scholars. The program is run by the Youth Foundation.

"The Guardian Scholarship is an investment in success, it's an investment in opportunity, but more than that it's an investment in what is good about our future," said Susie Davis, director of the Youth Foundation.

Success begets success

Two Guardian Scholars graduated from college this spring, Erik Garcia from Mesa State College, and Karen Mendoza from the University of Colorado at Boulder. Josie Johns graduated from Columbia University in New York City last year. Now she works at the National Basketball Association in New York.

"During my first year at Columbia University, I doubted myself and my right to be there," Johns said. "I said 'I can't,' but my Guardian Scholar family helped me realize that I could — and I did."

The Guardian Scholar support group quickly becomes a family.

"I feel very fortunate to be part of the Guardian Scholars," Garcia said. "My goal was always to go to college, but I knew it would be hard to afford it. The Youth Foundation helped me to succeed in college, not only financially, but I tried harder in school because I didn't want to let them down. I want to be able to support my family like they supported me."

He wants to help his wife get her teaching degree.

"I learned hard work pays off, and I want other youth to know that as well," Garcia said.

Mendoza was the first in her family to graduate from college. She's the oldest of four girls, and said she always tries to set a good example for her younger sisters.

Mendoza plans to take the certified professional accountant exam and work as an accountant and real estate broker.

More than a scholarship

The Youth Foundation Guardian Scholars are modeled after the successful Guardian Scholars program started by Ron and Lucy Davis in Orange County, California, in 1997.

"We are more than a scholarship, we are a family making dreams come true," said Ron Davis.

In Colorado, Mesa State College is a big part of it.

"My experience is that the success of efforts to help people is directly tied to the commitment and passion of the people trying to do the helping," said Tim Foster, president of Mesa State College. "The Guardian Scholars has proven very successful because of the Davises and their ability to share their vision and their passion for helping kids that truly need the help. I love working with them. There is only one agenda, getting these kids educated."

It's hard, but every May when bands play "Pomp and Circumstance" and they graduate from college, everyone knows it's worth it.

"Every May we have many students who complete one dream — graduation with bachelor's or master's degrees — by staying away from what might have been and overcoming big obstacles in their journey," Ron Davis said. "There are no boring dreams, just new adventures to explore, people to serve and mountains to climb."

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