

Program dares its students to dream

TOM VOGT *Columbian staff writer*

August 5, 2007; Page C1

"I Have a Dream" provides dedicated mentors and generous donors who help at-risk students reach college. And sometimes, that isn't enough.

Sometimes those students don't dream high enough. Sometimes their families don't dare to dream at all.

In some homes, "It's easier to accept someone going to jail than to college," said Lori Donoho, director of programs for the college-assistance program. "It sounds crazy, but they know where (their kids) are, and when they will be back."

And the family knows its child stands to come back as pretty much the same person.

But when a "Dreamer" goes to college - or even takes off on one of the program's frequent enrichment outings - "You come back different," Donoho said.

It's an extreme example of the challenges facing project leaders, but it does illustrate the range of issues they have to face.

"Environment can override everything," Donoho said Friday at the Red Lion Hotel at the Quay, during a national conference for Dreamer project coordinators.

They are the paid staffers who start with a group of grade-schoolers and spend up to a dozen years trying to get them ready for college. It's not just making sure their students get good grades and turn in their applications in time.

"There are thought processes we have to deal with," said Donoho.

The four-day session is giving project coordinators from all over the country a chance to compare notes, said Paul Schroeder, a leader in the Vancouver program.

Schroeder was project coordinator for the second of Vancouver's four Dreamer classes, a group of 68 fourth-graders from Hough Elementary selected in 1997. Now Schroeder is college coordinator for the local program.

Leaving the nest

Like Schroeder, several of the participants in a panel discussion Friday have had a chance to see their students go the distance, from rookie Dreamers to college students. Some of that is just getting the kids, and their families, used to the idea of the students leaving home.

Donoho recalled working with a girl who had four little sisters, and the Dreamer was the person who had to take care of them. Her mother figured that her Dreamer daughter just couldn't leave.

"We get the Dreamers away from home periodically, and that helps a lot," Donoho said.

"We create opportunities for them to go and grow, and their parents can see they're growing in a positive way."

Some students underestimate their own abilities and don't even shoot for a four-year school. One coordinator handled that by having a student fill out two applications. When an acceptance letter came back from the four-year school, the student's reaction was:

"Wow! I got in there?"

Some of their students take a shortsighted view, other leaders said. They'll enter a quick-turnaround job-training program, thinking that will help them reach their career goal - nursing, for example.

One leader recommended using the job requirements in a "help wanted" ad to set the student straight: "You are not qualified to be a nurse in an operating room."

But in bottom-line terms, **I Have a Dream** does help students get through high school, according to research commissioned by the national program.

The study, based on evaluations of 10 local "**I Have a Dream**" programs, showed participants were at least twice as likely to graduate from high school when compared with similar control groups in high-risk communities.

Students aren't the only ones whose lives are changed. The job of project coordinator is a long-term commitment. Donoho noted that she hasn't been paid to be a project coordinator since 2004. "And I'm still getting calls" from her students, she said.

Did you know?

- Since "**I Have a Dream**" started in 1981, there have been almost 200 projects working with more than 15,000 children.
- The Vancouver program started in 1995 with 60 fourth-graders at Washington Elementary, followed by 68 fourth-graders at Hough (1997); 68 fourth-graders at Harney (1999); and 91 second-graders at King (2001).

Tom Vogt can be reached at 360-759-8008 or at tom.vogt@columbian.com

Articles appear as they were originally printed in The Columbian and may not include subsequent corrections.

All materials appearing in The Columbian are protected by copyright as a collective work or compilation under U.S. copyright and other laws and are the property of The Columbian Publishing Company or the party credited as the provider of the content.