

Meet the Class of Regent Park '05

They never thought they'd make it through high school. Now they're in university

By PETER CHENEY

Saturday, September 24, 2005 Page M1

In a George Brown College hallway flooded with students, Ruth Brago is just one more face in the crowd, a young black woman with a bright pink ponytail and a look of amazement at the academic swirl that surrounds her.

Not long ago, she would have calculated her odds of making it into college at somewhere close to zero: Her marks were in the 50s, she had no money and no one she knew had ever graduated from a postsecondary institution.

But here she is, heading off to class with a stack of books and a daytimer packed with appointments. "Sometimes it's hard to believe," she says. "But it came true."

Ms. Brago's arrival on campus is a triumph over the forces of despair and economics. She was raised by a single mother in Regent Park, a place best known for drug-related murders and a high-school dropout rate of nearly 60 per cent.

Now, thanks to a program called Pathways to Education, Ms. Brago is among a new generation of Regent Park residents who are starting to rewrite the community's history.

Ms. Brago, 17, is part of the first class of students to complete four years in the program, which begins in Grade 9. This fall has provided the first, early proof of its value: Nearly two dozen Pathways alumni are now enrolled in degree programs.

Pathways administrators are now hoping to expand the program by landing federal funding, and they have an impressive set of statistics to back their request: Regent Park's high-school dropout rate has been cut nearly in half, and the number of students at "academic risk" has fallen to 14 per cent from 40.

"We could do a lot more," program director Norman Rowen says. "But we spend a lot of our time trying to scrape up the money. It's tough."

Among the Pathways success stories is 17-year-old Yang Shen, who is taking a double major in science and commerce at the University of Toronto, the beginning of a long-range plan to become a doctor and start her own medical clinic. Ms. Shen, who was raised by her parents in a one-bedroom Regent Park apartment, says university would have been out of the question without Pathways' critical combination of financial and psychological assistance.

"I wouldn't be here without Pathways," she says. "That's the reality."

Ms. Brago tells a similar story. She is enrolled in a three-year Child and Youth Care program at George Brown that costs nearly \$3,000 a year for tuition and books alone. Her mother, who lives on social assistance, couldn't afford to help her, but by attending Pathways during her four years of high school, Ms. Brago earned a \$4,000 bursary.

"That's why I'm here," she says.

The program provided far more than just money. The most important part of it, Ms. Brago says, was the tutoring that bolstered her academic skills -- and the psychological support that helped her overcome the downward pull of her environment.

"A lot of kids in Regent Park don't believe that they can make it into college," she says. "Pathways tells you that you can. They tell you to work, and they tell you to dream. They ask you to think about being more than you expected. They say: 'Why not be a doctor? Why not be a lawyer? Why settle for less?'"

For the children of Regent Park, getting through high school presents obstacles that wealthier students find hard to imagine. The average household income in the community is \$18,000, and 20 per cent of Regent Park families report no income at all. The neighbourhood has no high school. Instead, students attend nearly 40 schools around the city -- a particular problem, since many students can't afford TTC fare.

The Pathways program, which now includes more than 700 Regent Park students, combats these problems with a series of support systems. "We give them the tools they need," Mr. Rowen says. "And we take away some of the obstacles." Pathways provides a combination of tutoring, counselling and financial assistance. The program gives out \$35,000 worth of TTC tickets every month, and Pathway students earn \$1,000 a year toward college or university tuition. Volunteer tutors work with students to improve their academic skills, and counsellors advise them on how to prepare for college or university.

The program operates on a comparative shoestring, with an annual budget of \$2.9-million. Until last year, when the province contributed 15 per cent, virtually all of the program's funding came from private industry, which has praised Pathways as a far-sighted investment in social capital.

"It's a lot cheaper to invest in them now than to try and clean up the mess later," says Mr. Rowen, who notes that high-school graduates earn at least \$5,000 a year more than dropouts throughout their working life, and are five times less likely to go to prison.

Ms. Brago, who hopes to graduate from George Brown in the spring of 2009, provides a clear example of how Pathways can help. She moved to Regent Park with her mother after immigrating from Ghana in 1997. Although she enjoyed living there, she soon saw the hazards: Drug dealers and hookers openly plied their trade, and a man was shot to death in front of the building next to hers.

She had an 88-per-cent average in Grade 9. However, the next year, she started skipping classes to hang out with friends and her marks began to slide. Her average plummeted into the mid-50s. Ms. Brago felt deeply discouraged. "I didn't know what to do about it," she says.

When a Pathways counsellor noticed her falling grades, a recovery plan was put into place. Ms. Brago reported for tutoring twice a week in the basement of a local church and worked hard on key skills. Her Pathways counsellor identified a critical weakness: Ms. Brago didn't know how to write an essay. Overcoming this stumbling block was a key element of her academic resurrection: By Grade 12, her average was back in the high 80s.

Although she appreciates the financial and academic help she was given, Ms. Brago says the most important part of Pathways was moral support: "They keep telling you that you can do it," she says. "They don't let you quit."

The success of Pathways' first generation of graduates, Mr. Rowen says, will pave the way to greater gains in the community.

"There has been an assumption that if you're from Regent Park, you can't make it to university, and that you don't need it anyway," he says. "That's going to change. If you provide children with what they need, they will perform. There are kids in this community who are going to grow up to be doctors and lawyers and teachers. Just watch."