Princeton University Preparatory Program offers high achievers opportunity to attain their goal of attending college

By Bridget Clerkin of The Trenton Times

PRINCETON BOROUGH - With three other siblings and not much money in his family, 15-year-old Trott Montina used to worry how he was ever going to pay for college.

A football and basketball player and wrestler at Nottingham High School, the Hamilton student put all his focus and most of his effort into improving his athletic abilities, hoping that would open a path to a scholarship.

Now, Montina has a different type of daily training regimen, and his worries about finding the money for college are vastly reduced.

He was accepted this year into the Princeton University Preparatory Program (PUPP). This academic boot camp helps high achievers from low-income families attending one of six Mercer County high schools realize their dreams of getting into competitive colleges.

The program provides intensive academic enrichment courses throughout high school and helps students master the financial aid process so they can get into the schools of their choice.

"I used to always focus on sports scholarships," Montina said. "Now that I'm here, I know I'm a student first, athlete second. I'm going for the academic scholarships now."

Sitting at lunch after a morning session where they presented reports on their future goals and aspirations, Montina and five fellow PUPP participants said they once only knew of famous Ivy League or Division 1 schools, which offer sports scholarships. The program has opened their eyes to more options, such as the more academic-focused Muhlenberg College, they said.

"It's given me hope and a new identity," Montina said.

They also listed Princeton, Stanford, Lafayette, Brown, Rutgers and Rider universities and the College of New Jersey as schools they hoped to attend. PUPP takes an average of 24 high school sophomores from Mercer County schools each year and enrolls them in a three-year academic intensive. The students generally are in the top 15 percent of their high school classes, and PUPP has been shown to significantly improve their chances of getting into a college or university and completing an academic degree.

"I'm a role model to my brothers now," said Montina, the second oldest of several additional horses have been housed at the Walnridge Farm to house its retired racehorses waiting for adoption.

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Jacqueline Hernandez, center, a graduate of TCHS and Rutgers University and now a Princeton University Preparatory Program (PUPP) Alumni Fellow, works with PUPP students Antoinette Chavis, left, of Trenton High School West and Rafael Rodriguez, of Lawrence High School, rehearsing a literary reading.

Michael Mancuso/The Times

four boys. He said his younger brothers have brought their grades up to nearly all As since he began attending PUPP. PUPP scholars, who are selected from nominations by their teachers, enroll in a 6½-week course every summer, taking classes in writing, art, literature, math, science and social sciences the first year. The second summer they focus on SAT preparation and the third on college applications. Students continue to work with the program through the school year. Graduate students working for PUPP visit them at their high schools weekly for after-school sessions. Those meetings include lessons related to cultural activities such as trips to the opera, plays and various museums.

For Montina, the experience has made a huge difference in his life, he said. The program also has made a big impact on Trenton Central High School-West student Michael Whittington, who in his morning presentation described the many challenges he has faced in life. After being hit by a speeding car at age 2 and breaking both his legs, Whittington not only recovered but later began playing football. He changed schools three times during his middle school years, but was elected class president at the final school he attended.

Now he has set his sights on college, with hopes of becoming a biochemist.

“College has always been my ultimate goal, but PUPP has really made it a tangible dream of mine,” he said. When asked if they minded all the extra schooling and work that comes with the program, Montina, Whittington and the rest of the group vigorously shook their heads.

They said they treasured the continual push to do their best and keep growing, along with the support the program offers.

“PUPP gives students the desire to do better,” said Aaron D’Oleo, a sophomore at Ewing High School. “They want you to succeed in life.” Still, the occasional extra vigorous day can spark a few grumbles, said Shamelle Ingram, the program’s assistant teacher and a Trenton Central High School graduate.

A former PUPP scholar herself, Ingram went on to graduate from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and is in graduate school at George Washington University, studying for a degree in counseling. When students are unhappy with their workload, she tells them she understands their feelings but reminds them that it is all worth it, she said.

“I have very high expectations of them, because I know it’s possible to achieve, I know it’s possible to excel,” she said. “I know it’s possible to be that rose that grows from the concrete.” Ingram said it was her own experience at PUPP that pushed her to go far. Being at Princeton and seeing other minorities teaching there was “very inspiring,” she said. Now back with the program, she hopes to be able to pass on that experience to those coming up in the next generation.

“It’s only 10 minutes from Trenton, but it’s a whole different world,” she said. “I just wish more students would get to have this experience.”

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Shamelle Ingram teaches high school students in the Princeton University Preparatory Program (PUPP) a rigorous, academic and cultural enrichment program that supports high-achieving, low-income high school students from local districts. Ingram went through the program herself as a TCHS student. Michael Mancuso/The Times
Shamelle Ingram, a TCHS graduate who graduated college and is now in graduate school, was helped by the Princeton University Preparatory Program (PUPP). PUPP is a rigorous, academic and cultural enrichment program that supports high-achieving, low-income high school students from local districts. She now is helping other students in her former position by working in PUPP as a teacher.

Michael Mancuso/The Times

Ewing High School student Kevin Fernandez, left, holds his nose while he tries a taste of some food that is not part of his regular diet during an exercise to try something different in order to expand awareness and broaden horizons at the Princeton University Preparatory Program (PUPP). PUPP is a rigorous, academic and cultural enrichment program that supports high-achieving, low-income high school students from local districts. At right is Ana Patricia Esqueda, of TCHS.

Michael Mancuso/The Times

Ashley Vinson, 2nd from left, a graduate of Ewing High School and student at Princeton University, works with TCHS student David Lopez, left, on a film students are making in the Princeton University Preparatory Program (PUPP). PUPP is a rigorous, academic and cultural enrichment program that supports high-achieving, low-income high school students from local districts. At right is the actress on-camera in this scene.

Michael Mancuso/The Times
Ewing High School student Naimah Turner, seated, center, tries a taste of some food that is not part her regular diet during an exercise to try something different in order to expand awareness and broaden horizons at the Princeton University Preparatory Program (PUPP) a rigorous, academic and cultural enrichment program that supports high-achieving, low-income high school students from local districts. Seated at left is Michael Asparrin, also of Ewing High and at right is Jeffrey Garcia Sanchez, of Lawrence High School. Standing is teacher Shamelle Ingram, who went through the program herself as a high school student. Michael Mancuso/The Times

Ashley Vinson, center, a graduate of Ewing High School and student at Princeton University, works with TCHS students Erik Lima, left and David Lopez on a film they are making in the Princeton University Preparatory Program (PUPP) a rigorous, academic and cultural enrichment program that supports high-achieving, low-income high school students from local districts. Michael Mancuso/The Times

Detail of a jar of sand in the Princeton University Preparatory Program (PUPP) a rigorous, academic and cultural enrichment program that supports high-achieving, low-income high school students from local districts Michael Mancuso/The Times