



"These kids will go to colleges where the leaders of our country have gone," says Justine Stamen (center, with Teak Fellows and staff).

DeWitt White was one of Justine Stamen's favorite students. Although he grew up on the streets of some of New York City's roughest neighborhoods, he learned to play classical piano by ear, developing a talent so dazzling that he landed a Carnegie Hall recital by the time he was 15. "It wasn't something you'd expect of a teenager, especially a homeless one," says Stamen, who befriended DeWitt when he attended a summer academic program she ran in The Bronx. But in 1997 her young friend was found shot to death under a train

IVY BOUND

After the murder of a promising teen, Justine Stamen helps others prep for success

trestle in Staten Island, crack cocaine stuffed in his pocket. "His death was a huge blow," Stamen, now 33, says. "I felt like the whole city let him down."

Months after DeWitt's funeral, Stamen quit her job, and with help from friends in the business and charity worlds she embarked on a mission: to give others the future he would never have. The result is the Teak Fellowship, a Manhattan-based organization that helps poor teens gain admission to some of the country's most elite high schools. "I think of it as a Rhodes Scholarship for middle school students," says

Teachers



The murder of best friend Teak Dyer (in 1987) inspired Stamen to help others.

Stamen, who runs the program with a staff of eight in New York's Chelsea neighborhood. "Thomas Jefferson said we should be an aristocracy of talent, that people should rise and fall by their abilities. But it isn't like that. And that's why I'm here."

Funded by private donations and corporate gifts, Teak selects promising students in the seventh grade from New York City public schools. Called "fellows," they attend weekend and after-school classes, summer boot-camp sessions and receive academic counseling plus training in phone skills, interview techniques and even diction. Most go on to private schools, which pick up tuition, while Teak foots the bill for most other expenses. All of the 20 original fellows, now high school seniors, are applying to college. "They always tell you at Teak that you can do it," says Stephanie Hiciano, 17. The daughter of Dominican immigrant parents and a senior at Manhattan's posh Convent of the Sacred Heart, she hopes to attend Stamen's alma mater: Brown.

Still, the gulf between prep school and the inner city can be vast. "One time I was taking the bus home, and when it stopped in front of my place, somebody said, 'Who lives here?'" says Thai Vu, 17, a senior at the elite Riverdale Country School who lives on a tough block in Spanish Harlem. "That was hard to hear." To help bridge the gap, Stamen takes fellows on field trips to museums and plays, and in 2002 arranged a spe-



Stamen says, "We all just adored DeWitt," who was gunned down at 17.

cial dinner with Bill and Hillary Clinton. "To see them sit down to dinner with a former President and a senator, that brought tears to my eyes," she says.

An only child of divorced parents, Stamen, who attended a private school in Los Angeles growing up, developed a social conscience young, volunteer-

ing in a local homeless shelter as a teen. But it was only after her best friend, Teak Dyer, was murdered by a stranger at the end of their senior year in high school that she committed to a career helping others. Graduating from Brown in 1992, Stamen moved to New York City, where she made another friend who died too young. Within two years of DeWitt White's death, Stamen had raised \$400,000 to launch Teak (named for her friend) and now hopes to create a \$3.5 million permanent endowment to help an ever-growing number of needy students. If she eventually reaches that lofty goal, Stamen says all credit should go to the young pianist from The Bronx. "I couldn't have done any of this without DeWitt," she says. "His death kicked me into gear."

By Bob Meadows. Joanno Fowler in New York City

Head of the Class: One Teak Fellow's Story

In many ways, Ama Blanchette, 17, is a typical preppy. She's a B student at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, one of the country's oldest boarding schools, plays tennis and has her eye on attending an Ivy League college when she graduates in 2005. But Ama comes from a different world than her privileged classmates: Raised by her mother, Karen, a single parent, in Co-Op City, a middle-income housing cooperative in The Bronx, she became a Teak Fellow at 12. The experience opened up a future she never dreamed of.

At my public school we had more than 30 students in a class. A lot of them didn't care about school at all, and the teacher just yelled a lot. I really didn't know there were other kinds of schools out there. Then, in seventh grade, a guidance counselor told me about Teak. When I got in, my mom was so excited. She's raised me and my brother alone and would do anything for us, but she doesn't have the connections Teak



Blanchette at Co-Op City.

does. With Justine's help, I got accepted to Exeter in the eighth grade. When I told my friends I was going to boarding school, they said, "What did you do wrong?"

I felt really nervous when I first got there. I thought rich people were snooty. But everyone is really nice. Being at Exeter changed my vision of myself. Now I think about becoming an architect or an ambassador. I've learned that it doesn't matter what other people say you can do. It's what you think you can do.