

Big Town **Big Heart**

Giving talented kids the support to succeed



Lissette Duran (right), with mentee Cheryl Lima (left), is a successful graduate and volunteer mentor at TEAK, an organization that helps bright and motivated New York City students from low-income families gain admission to and succeed at top high schools and colleges.

When Lissette Duran was a student at Mott Hall Junior High School in Harlem, she applied to the TEAK Fellowship Program, which helps bright and motivated New York City students from low-income families gain admission to and succeed at top high schools and colleges. The seventh grader was chosen to be one of 22 students that TEAK works with on an annual basis. She was part of TEAK's second class, the Angels, in the year 2000. Since then, TEAK Fellowship has grown to accepting 145 students with 125 mentors a year.

The program enabled Duran to get into ninth grade at Phillips Academy Andover, a boarding school in Massachusetts. Duran's academic career continued at University of Pennsylvania, where she graduated with a degree in communications in 2009.

Now 24, Duran will be attending Columbia Law School in the fall. In addition to being a successful graduate of TEAK, in 2009, she became a mentor.

The TEAK Fellowship was established in 1998 by Justine Stamen Arrillaga in memory of Teak Dyer (1970-1988) and DeWitt White (1980-1997). Dyer was an outstanding student, upstanding citizen and friend of Justine's. White, a former student of Justine's, was a gifted musician.

Both were casualties of complicated

urban problems, murdered at young ages — Dyer in Los Angeles, White in New York. The TEAK program aims to draw on their spirits and change the lives of talented young people who come after them.

Along with academic support, TEAK provides leadership training, exposure to the arts and outdoors, mentoring, career experience and assistance with the high school and college application processes.

The mentor program connects each TEAK fellow with a volunteer adult mentor who serves as a positive role model, advocate and a friend. The match is made in eighth grade and the aim is to maintain the relationship throughout high school. Mentors and fellows communicate monthly via email or phone and meet in person three times per year. The foundation of the TEAK mentor-mentee relationship is that both parties are responsible for developing it.

Duran, the oldest of four kids, who grew up in the Washington Heights/Inwood area of Manhattan, says the experience she had with her mentor was amazing.

"She was completely different from me — an affluent Italian woman with kids who lived on the Upper West Side. Just being a teenager was hard enough. My mentor helped me through it. We dressed up in funny costumes, went trick-or-treating and got individual extra large tubs of popcorn

on our movie dates. We looked absolutely hilarious, but it was the break from reality that I needed. That is what I hope to do and be for Cheryl, my mentee."

TEAK helped Duran discover all of the opportunities available to students, including financial aid, filling out scholarship applications and getting loans. This summer, she attended Sponsors for Education Opportunities (SEO), a program that helps minorities prep for law school and gives them a foot in the door in the legal community.

Duran's mentee Cheryl Lima is attending Blair Academy in northwestern New Jersey.

"Before I went to Phillips Academy, I had no idea that boarding schools even existed," says Duran. "It's been really great to impart my wisdom and experiences to Cheryl. When I was in boarding school, I didn't get why I had to work so hard. I can show and tell Cheryl because she is going through every single step that I did."

For instance, Duran says she was afraid to try new things like squash, lacrosse or crew. She encourages her mentee to try it all. As a result, Cheryl is studying dance and playing lacrosse.

"Nowadays, kids, especially minority children and those coming from lower socioeconomic means, have so much responsibility. But it is always met with this

demand to not grow up so fast and to stay a kid. I see that struggle with my mentee and I remember my own. I want to be someone she can be a kid with, someone with whom she can shed those layers of adult responsibilities and doubts and just be a teenager trying to make it through high school," explains Duran.

"Lissette keeps me grounded. She acts like a guide," says Lima. "I couldn't ask for a better person. She's like an older sister to me."

"Mentoring is a way for me to pay it forward," says Duran, noting that she was in class two of TEAK and Cheryl is in class 11. "It's nice to be able to sit back and look at all of my experiences and give meaningful advice. TEAK made me the person I am today. To be confident and not put a limit on what I do and achieve goals, even if they don't seem close."

To learn more about TEAK, call (212) 288-6678 or visit www.teakfellowship.org.

— Holly Reich

About Big Town **Big Heart**

Big Town Big Heart is a series of articles showcasing organizations and volunteers who make a difference.