

Caribbean Life

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TEAK provides a way for disadvantaged students

By Criscilla Z. Stafford

The TEAK Fellowship is a free program that steers academically gifted students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds into top high schools and colleges. With scholarships and academic support, TEAK will work with students for six years, starting the summer after they complete 7th Grade.

Students in the TEAK program attend summer, after-school and weekend

programs to maintain their place as TEAK "fellows". Community service and field trips also make up the life of a TEAK fellow.

There is assistance in test preparation, such as PSAT/SAT prep courses which fellows can take at a reduced financial rate or free. In the 10 years TEAK has been in existence, several of their students have ended up at specialized high schools here in New York City, private

high schools (Horace Mann, Packer Collegiate) and boarding schools on the Eastern Seaboard (Phillips Exeter in New Hampshire). Over 25 percent of TEAK fellows have entered Ivy League Colleges such as Harvard, Brown, Dartmouth and other prestigious institutes of higher learning.

TEAK was created by Justine Stamen in 1998 after the death of one of her summer students in an academic program

she worked with in the Bronx.

Although DeWitt White came from a disadvantaged background, he knew how to play classical piano by ear. At age 15, DeWitt performed at a recital at Carnegie Hall. Even with a promising future, DeWitt was murdered in 1997.

Justine started TEAK so other disadvantaged students would have other options besides running the streets or looking for

money in illegal trade.

The TEAK Fellowship is named for Justine's best friend Teak Dyer, who was murdered on the eve of their graduation in 1988.

Through private donations, fundraisers and corporate sponsorships TEAK has blossomed from Justine's one woman mission to a full staff (paid, mentors and volunteers) devoted to helping good students gain entrance to schools regardless of their lack of income. 7th graders who have high grades and score highly on standardized tests are encouraged to become a TEAK fellow.

TEAK holds several open houses a year where families are encouraged to research TEAK and understand the sacrifices students have to make to stay in the program.

Dyese (pronounced DEE-YES-EE) Taylor, a first generation American (her mother is from Tobago and her father is from Jamaica). Dyese is one of the many TEAK success stories. She was in the first group of

TEAK fellows in 1998. After passing the qualifying test to enter TEAK, Dyese enrolled in their Summer Institute after she completed 7th Grade. She attended The Dalton School 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. five days a week for 6 weeks.

As a TEAK fellow, Dyese took accelerated courses in Math, English and Writing, plus courses in band (drumming) and step (dance) for the summers after 7th and 8th grades. There were field trips to financial institutions such as Goldman Sachs, and visits from guest speakers. Dyese and other fellows were assigned mentors (in 8th grade) who took active roles in their lives.

Dyese also had prep classes that helped her to take the SHST (Specialized High School Test). Dyese had excellent scores and enrolled in Spence School, an all girls N.Y.C. day school on a full academic scholarship. TEAK representatives visit the fellows who are enrolled at boarding schools and

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communicate through phone and email.

During the summer,

Dyese still had meetings at TEAK, community service, test/interview preparation and mentoring ses-

sions every summer.

TEAK also helps their students with paid/unpaid internships during their summer breaks from school. A select few TEAK fellows live abroad with host families during the summer to learn another language and culture on full paid scholarship/stipend.

With invaluable assistance from TEAK, Dyese was accepted into 10 of the 11 colleges/universities that she applied for in 2004. The TEAK College Guidance Department escorts their students on trips to various colleges/

universities before they submit their applications.

Dyese entered Dartmouth University on a full academic scholarship and graduated this past June. She is now a first year student in Columbia University Medical School. Dyese admits that "it was hard giving up my summer, because you can't go on vacation," but added that "it was well worth my sacrifice."

Dyese had invaluable support from her mother Carol, who made sure she attended the sessions TEAK required of her daughter and stayed

informed on Dyese's progress within TEAK.

To become a TEAK fellow, your family can live within the five boroughs of N.Y.C. Although it's important that your child has good grades, it is also important to TEAK that your child shows commitment, enthusiasm and the will to sacrifice their time and energy for the TEAK program.

She is still friends with her TEAK classmates -- some of whom are in postgraduate institutions or already started their careers. Dyese says that "TEAK is the right place to be if you want to be pushed academically."

Admission test for the next TEAK Fellowship class is on, Dec. 6, 2008. You may call Morgan Porzio, director of Communications at 212 288-6678 X107 or email Porzio@teakfellowship.org for further information on TEAK.

Be sure to tell them that you read about TEAK in *Caribbean Life*.



Dyese Taylor shares her experiences as Executive Director Lynn Sorenson (left of Dyese) looks on.