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'I've changed everything'

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The college journey for four graduates receiving diplomas this weekend from the University of Dayton began nearly a decade ago at an innovative high school on the University's campus.

The students, most of whom will be the first in their families to earn a college degree, are all graduates of the Dayton Early College Academy, a highly acclaimed charter school with the singular focus of preparing urban students to get into and succeed in college.

"The partnership between DECA and UD is bringing first-generation college graduates into the work world, and we're proud of them and the education they received at DECA and the University of Dayton," said Judy Hennessey, DECA superintendent and CEO.

When Hadil Issa and her family fled the intensifying Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 2001 for the U.S., she couldn't speak any English. She quickly caught on and soon found herself wanting more than the public high schools she attended. She came to DECA halfway through her freshman year and finished with nearly 50 college credits.

Three of her eight siblings are currently enrolled at DECA, and two have graduated. One plans to enroll at the University after completing her associate's degree at Sinclair Community College.

Issa said she found herself struggling in her college classes at times, but she never felt alone. University of Dayton faculty encouraged her to persevere and find different ways to succeed. It's the people, she said, who make the difference.

When she arrived on campus, she was part of a very small minority of Muslim women. But she never felt like she didn't belong.

"Since I came, a lot more Muslim women have come, and the University has been very welcoming, providing a prayer room and allowing us to meet on Fridays. I can't say enough about the people here and the community. When you have an understanding of the community and they have an understanding of you, you're going to thrive."

Although she will receive a diploma this weekend for a bachelor's degree in chemical engineering, she doesn't plan to attend the ceremony. She wants to wait to walk in graduation next year when she receives her master's degree.

She then plans to pursue a Ph.D. in pharmacology and toxicology.

Precious Billingsley, of Dayton, graduated DECA in 2008 as part of the second graduating class. She is earning a degree in criminal justice and plans to work at the probation office in Montgomery County and pursue a master's degree in public administration from the University of Dayton.

Billingsley admits she struggled her first two years on campus. No one she knew had gone to college, and she sometimes felt like she didn't belong. She kept quiet in class and hid her troubles. But then she remembered how many people had encouraged her through the years and invested in her, and she recommitted herself to success.

"UD is a good school. My professors gave me second chances when I didn't deserve it. They didn't give up on me, so I wasn't going to give up on myself," she said.

Raised by a single mother with two older brothers who did not finish high school and a younger sister attending the University of Toledo, Billingsley points to her mom and a few good teachers along the way who always encouraged her and said they saw something in her that would make her successful.

She knows her achievement – the first in her family to graduate college – will make a difference for more than just her.

"I can't even put in words how I feel, how I've made my mother and my grandmother feel," she said. "I cry when I think about it.

I've changed everything. I've set a precedent for the rest of the kids in my family, the generations to come. They can see that it's possible and have something to aspire to."

Margaret Idiake knows she is fulfilling the dreams of her parents as well. Though her father graduated college in the 1970s after emigrating to the U.S. from Nigeria, she said it was always his biggest goal for her to graduate from college herself.

More than just earning a degree in mechanical engineering, she already has a job as an application engineer at Schneider Electric in West Chester Twp. She will visit customers and design custom circuit panels for them. She also plans to attend graduate school part time.

"I felt very prepared for college, because of DECA. When I came to UD, I was an excellent writer, and I was not intimidated by the amount of papers I had to write," she said. "I also had earned a few college credits, which allowed me to take a lighter course load, focus on the important classes and still graduate in four years."

Ariel Giles, a former DECA graduate, will also graduate this weekend with a degree in philosophy.

The University of Dayton founded DECA in 2003 in partnership with Dayton Public Schools. DECA reorganized in 2007 as a charter school operated by the University of Dayton, enrolled seventh-graders for the first time in 2008 and opened an elementary school in 2012.

DECA primarily serves students who are underrepresented in higher education, unprepared academically to meet college readiness standards, unable to pay for college and often first-generation college students. Students receive substantial personal attention while pursuing their academic interests. To graduate, they must complete a minimum of nine credit hours of college courses.

Since its inception, DECA has attracted significant national attention. The Harvard University Graduate School of Education, Jobs for the Future and The Chronicle of Higher Education have studied the school's innovative approach to education.

The Center for Secondary School Redesign has called DECA "a concrete response to convince and prepare urban learners to go to college," and the Council of the Great City Colleges of Education honored DECA with its national Urban Impact Award as exemplary partnership between an urban school district and a university.

But the best measure of DECA's success is its graduates. Here, every student holds on to one thought: "I'm going to college."

All 170 of DECA's graduates have attended college, with more than 85 percent graduated or still enrolled.

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