



## MAKING THE GRADE | BREAKTHROUGH

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Last April, a postal worker delivered a letter to the home of then eighth grader Lynette Strickland. The letter predicted her future for the next four years. Strickland, a Breakthrough class member and applicant to the college preparatory high school, St. Stephens Episcopal School, nervously held the envelope in her hands. Breakthrough is part of a 28-year-old national program that provides a path for students who will be the first in his or her family to graduate from college.

Many high school students view attending college as a luxury. Breakthrough dedicates valuable resources to change this perspective, making higher education possible for more families.

“I ripped the letter open and read the words that I had been accepted into St. Stephens for the Fall semester on scholarship,” said Strickland. “My mom and I cried, then called all of our family members to share the happy news.”

Strickland’s journey to this moment began in the sixth grade when a Breakthrough representative gave an informational presentation about the education program at her middle school. She then realized that her goal of graduating from college was attainable and that Breakthrough could provide the tools to make it happen.

Austin’s chapter was founded in 2001 in partnership with Applied Materials, and enrolled its first class of students in the spring of 2002. The program’s executive director, Jessica D’Arcy, explained why Austin needed a Breakthrough chapter. “In this thriving city, it is unbelievable how many kids are not meeting their potential,” she said. “There were 612 ninth graders enrolled in the 1998-1999 school year. Four years later, only 199 graduated. Austin Independent School District (A.I.S.D.) is doing its best, but there are 78,000 kids in this district and Breakthrough is a necessity if these students are going to have a fighting chance.”

The organization boasts no secret formula for admitting approximately 40 students each spring. In addition to being the first aspiring to attend college within the family, 90 percent of the families

**facing page** each rock is hand carved using a chisel

**“FOR OUR KIDS WHO ARE FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE GOERS, THE IDEA SEEMS PRETTY REMOTE, SINCE LOW-INCOME STUDENTS ARE SEVEN TIMES LESS LIKELY TO ATTEND COLLEGE, REGARDLESS OF THEIR ACADEMIC ABILITIES”— JESSICA D’ARCY**

qualify for free or reduced lunches. “Some families are homeless, some parents are incarcerated, and some families have both working parents, struggling at minimum wage jobs,” said D’Arcy. “Our program teaches them that despite their disadvantages, there are coping strategies to make life easier.”

The program focuses on Johnston, Travis, Lanier, and Reagan high schools and Fulmore, Pearce, Kealing, and Martin middle schools, as well as Zavala and Allison elementary schools. The staff encourages students to apply to college preparatory high schools outside of their neighborhoods, as is the case with Strickland. Any student living in the A.I.S.D. parameters can apply for the program, as long as they are able to utilize the free Capital Metro transportation services. Each applicant must complete a written application and essay, a parent or guardian pledge of support, teacher recommendation, transcript, and standardized test scores.

Breakthrough emphasizes that upon acceptance, a six-year commitment is required

from the student. Sixth and seventh graders must attend six-week summer sessions at the University of Texas at the College of Liberal Arts, with two hours of homework per night. Applicants must also have the academic intellect to complete the rigorous training. Students receive school year mentoring and advocacy, Saturday workshops, college counseling, family events, test preparation and individual guidance, and enrichment programs.

“It is paramount that students are reached in the sixth grade because that it a pivotal time when they must decide the kind of person that they are going to become,” said Cindy Austin, original Breakthrough staff member and counseling consultant. “Academically, we encourage them to enroll in algebra early, in order to ensure that they are on the college track. Socially, the sixth grade is a developmentally key time, when kids determine their own individuality. We offer a positive outlet for them to challenge their minds and show that being smart is cool.”

Austin also offers support to students who

are facing personal struggles during their journey to high school graduation. “Any time you are working with youth, there is a high level of emotion involved,” said Austin. “Recently one of our students went through a traumatic experience and simultaneously his phone and Internet connection were disconnected. His single mother reached out to us, saying that as a 13-year-old male, her son probably would not talk to her, but knew it was important for him to communicate his feelings. We paid for the phone and Internet to be reestablished. Breakthrough cut the red tape, and helped that student during a painful time.”

The organization also provides methods for students to make their anger more productive. “In our society, children are supposed to be sweet and nice, and an angry child appears disrespectful to adults,” said Austin. “For many of these kids, anger is a means for survival; it is a way for getting home safely from the bus stop. We work with these students to understand their feelings and help them direct those emotions in a more positive way.”



Breakthrough’s teaching staff is comprised of young, paid student teachers trained by the program’s staff and four professional teachers. Their training process includes interacting with the students, negotiating school bureaucracy, and tutoring tactics.

“For our kids who are first generation college goers, the idea seems pretty remote, since low-income students are seven times less likely to attend college, regardless of their academic abilities,” said D’Arcy. “Having teachers who are just a few years older, with similar backgrounds, helps the kids to relate. Our teachers know all of the excuses because it has not been that long since they used those same tricks.”

Since finances are a daily struggle for most Breakthrough families, a college counselor

has recently been added to the professional staff to assist students with the college financial aid process. “We have discovered that it is important to meet individually with each family and navigate the intimidating paper work,” said D’Arcy.

According to St. Stephens-bound Strickland, Breakthrough played a role in her acceptance to the high school. “There was an early admission deadline as well as a required essay,” she said. “Breakthrough helped me during the overwhelming process.”

Strickland, an aspiring veterinarian, chose the school based on various factors, including its diversity, hands-on science curriculum, outdoor campus, small classes, and ‘dogs-allowed’ policy. “I am so excited

to go there, especially because 97 percent of its students attend college after graduation and of course, for the fact that they let dogs roam the campus.”

Strickland always knew that an education was important, but after participating in Breakthrough, realizes how her decision to attend college will influence her family. “I want them to see that dreams can happen with an education,” she said. “They need to know that they can go beyond high school and the world of low-paying jobs and accomplish their own dreams.” **AC**

*To learn more about Breakthrough, visit [www.breakthroughaustin.org](http://www.breakthroughaustin.org) or call (512) 232 5181.*

**this page** individually hand carved rocks are set in place along the town lake trail