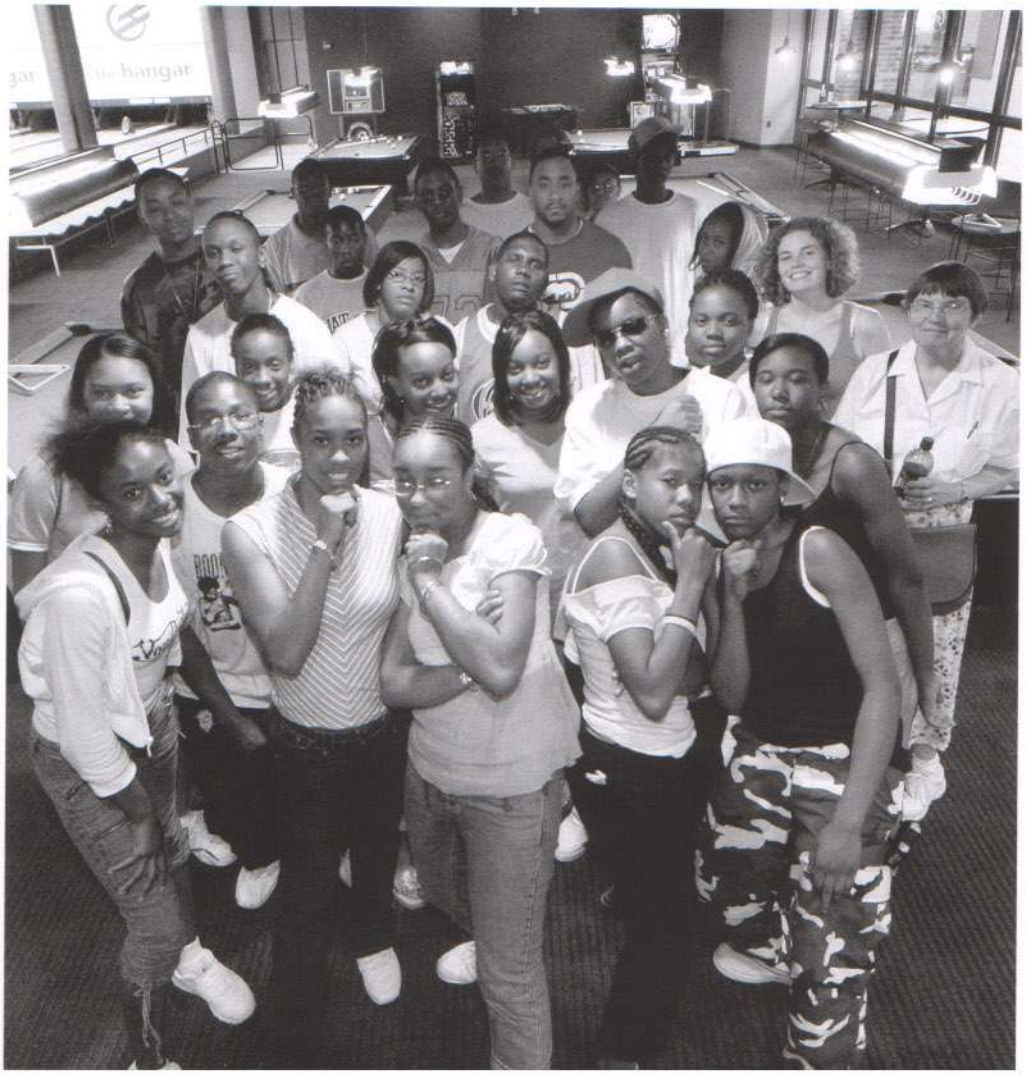
'Going for the Gold'

Marianist Urban Students Program (MUSP) Helps High School Students Realize Their Potential.

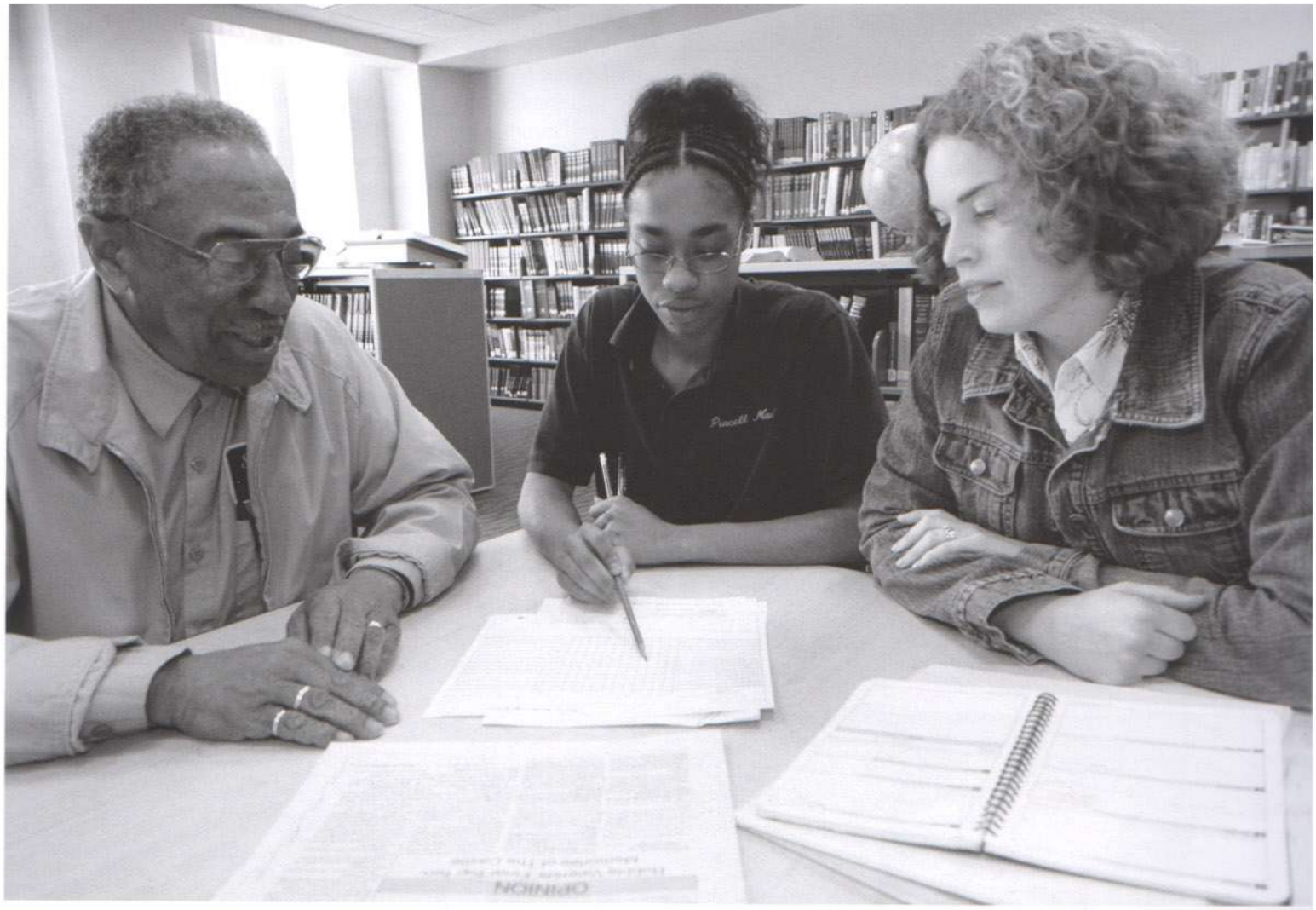
BY SHELLY REESE

IN MANY WAYS, PURCELL MARIAN High School students Britnee Dumas and Vanesha Harper are polar opposites. Britnee exudes confidence and is strong academically; Vanesha is shy and struggles with some of her courses. But they have one thing in common. Both have potential — the reason they were selected for the Marianist Urban Students Program (MUSP).

Launched in 1992, MUSP identifies high-potential students in urban Marianist elementary schools and offers them financial, academic and social support



MUSP students at the University of Dayton in Ohio, with directors Shannon Lively, back right, and Sister Martha Mooney, far right



Vanesha Harper discusses her report card and academic goals with her grandfather, John Harper, and Shannon Lively.

to succeed at Marianist high schools.

A cheerleader with a ready smile, Britnee hopes her 3.875 grade-point average is good enough for a college scholarship to an engineering school. Like her mother, who earned her bachelor's degree last spring and is pursuing a master's degree, the 17-year-old senior understands the power of education.

"My mom always tells me to stay on track and work toward my dreams," Britnee says.

Vanesha, 15, lives with her grandparents and helps care for her 7-year-old brother, a diabetic who requires daily insulin injections. She wants to become a pediatrician. Although Vanesha attends MUSP after-school tutoring sessions, she says that isn't why she participates in the program. "MUSP is like a family. You get a lot of love."

Breaking the cycle

In Cincinnati, MUSP draws students from St. Francis de Sales elementary school and prepares them for Purcell Marian. Marianist Brother Stan Zubek started the Cleveland program in 1999. Cleveland students are selected from St. Joseph and St. Aloysius elementary schools and attend Villa Angela-St. Joseph High School (VASJ).

"Without financial aid from MUSP, tuition costs would prevent most of these students from attending Catholic high schools," explains Marianist Brother Gene Meyerpeter, program coordinator. "They wouldn't be exposed to the same values and would be lost in the shuffle of the public school system. In some cases, they'd be at risk of not graduating from high school."

Currently, about 40 students are enrolled

in MUSP, and 66 have graduated — with most graduates enrolling in four-year colleges and universities. Every MUSP student receives a scholarship that finances two-thirds of his or her high school tuition. Each year, the Society of Mary contributes $254,000 to MUSP for student tuitions, directors' salaries and office expenses. In-kind donations from the high schools cover ancillary expenses, such as office space and photocopiers, and donors occasionally finance special trips.

But finances aren't the only obstacles the students face. Many MUSP students come from single-parent homes, and their mothers work multiple jobs. Others are bounced from one relative's house or apartment to another's. Some have family members who are addicted to drugs or are in prison. For them, the program's requirements — maintaining a "C" average and staying out of trouble — pose major challenges.

"These kids can get money to come to Purcell Marian from other scholarship funds, but keeping them here is the challenge," says Shannon Lively, director of the Cincinnati program. "That's where MUSP really makes a difference. It provides the social and academic support they need to make it. MUSP gives these students a Catholic high school education that prepares them for college. Earning their diploma allows them to break away from the bad examples that surround them."

MUSP directors serve as guides for the students, helping them navigate difficult high school years. That might mean teaching students to respect themselves and others or comforting students after a fight with a friend.

After-school tutoring is provided twice a week, and informal tutoring is available Monday through Friday. All MUSP students are encouraged to take advantage

Juanika Roberts enters the University of Dayton on a field trip with fellow Villa Angela-St. Joseph High School students.

of the tutoring, but it's mandatory for anyone whose grade in a particular subject drops below a "C." Students also can sign up for a half-credit MUSP class that is structured like a study hall. Participants get help on their homework, college applications or goal-setting exercises.

From left, DeLawrence Evans, Briana Oldham and Jasmine Roberts

Potential for success

Because MUSP is neither strictly need-based nor academic, candidates are evaluated on a wide variety of criteria. Local MUSP advisory boards include Marianist representatives, program directors, school principals and community members. "The boards look at prospective participants' grade school attendance, grades, effort, conduct, parental support, financial need, community involvement and church participation," says Sister Martha Mooney, OSU, Cleveland program director.

Board members are especially interested in attributes or activities that set a student apart and showcase his or her potential. For 17-year-old Jimmy McLeod, it was initiative. Originally, Jimmy wasn't accepted into the program. During his freshman year, however, his mother became ill and was forced to retire from her job. Understanding the financial burden VASJ's tuition placed on his family, Jimmy approached the MUSP board without his parents' knowledge and petitioned the advisors to reconsider his application. He was accepted into the program as a sophomore and has maintained a 3.3 GPA while participating in Varsity Basketball.

VASJ's Maya Muhammad is another example. Although her GPA was only 2.6 during her freshman year — barely above MUSP's cutoff point — Maya attended every tutoring session. "I've been working in high schools for more than 30 years, and I've never seen a student so anxious to succeed or so ready to seek help," Sister Martha says. "The most impressive thing about Maya is that she doesn't ask questions just because she thinks the material is on a test. She asks them because she's committed to education and deeper comprehension."

Instilling Marianist values

The small MUSP office in the basement of Purcell Marian is filled with standard high-school stuff: reference books, filing cabinets and computers. Taped to the walls are a print of the Madonna and Child, "The Five Characteristics of Marianist Education," Webster's definition of accountability and a bar chart depicting unemployment by educational status. An enormous map of the world dominates the room, and there are numerous collages of smiling MUSP students.

According to Brother Gene, MUSP isn't just about graduating students from a Marianist school; it's about instilling Marianist values. Emphasis is placed on community involvement. Sister Martha's students serve meals at a local soup kitchen. In addition, many MUSP students

Vanesha Harper, left, and Sakinah Abdur-Rahman do research in Purcell Marian's library.

volunteer on an individual basis. VASJ juniors Lauren and Shavon Jones, 16, work at the Cleveland Animal Protection League. Purcell Marian sophomore Joshua Dennis, 15, is a junior deacon and plays the piano for Sunday school students at his church, and junior DeLawrence Evans, 16, helps incoming MUSP freshman acclimate to VASJ.

MUSP field trips, spiritual retreats, graduation dinners, picnics, Christmas parties, monthly birthday celebrations and other activities are designed to bring the group closer together. "It's not like a scholarship program that just hands you the money," says DeLawrence. "I have a special relationship with everyone in the group."

The directors, Shannon and Sister Martha, take on many roles. Sometimes they're motherly: During exam periods, Shannon prepares "care packages" filled with snacks for her students. Sometimes they're mentors, guiding students down the right path. And sometimes they're disciplinarians.

"I get in their face," says Sister Martha, who expects her students to check in with her twice a day. Whether it's just a quick hello or reviewing a homework planner, she believes "eyeball-to-eyeball" contact is essential.

"My job is to deliver consistency," she says. "Many kids today don't experience a lot of consistency because their home lives are fragmented. My bottom line is to clear the way for these kids to be successful in high school."

"The MUSP director is a teacher advocate as well as a student advocate," says Anthony Corder, a religious studies teacher at Purcell Marian. "I can go to

Shannon to follow up with students who may be having trouble turning in assignments or staying organized. She knows the students and their families and can help me get students to stay focused.

"Program participants aren't the only ones who benefit from MUSP," he adds. "The entire high school community benefits as well. MUSP infuses schools with great kids."

Jasmine Roberts joins friends as they fill out paperwork.

Providing support

"I couldn't have attended a Catholic high school without MUSP," says Cincinnati advisory board member Montez Legrand, 27, a graduate of the first MUSP class. The daughter of a single mother who worked as a hospital housekeeper, Montez says the support she received from the late MUSP Director Sister Mary Ann Drerup, SNDdeN, fellow students and a program mentor changed her life. "I still remember how my mother cried when we found out I'd been accepted.

"The diversity of the participants contributed to the program's richness," she continues. "We were all originals. Our group had a jock and a class clown. I was the quiet, shy kid. I needed someone to draw me out and push me. Sister Mary Ann's mantra was, 'Go for the gold. Go for the gold.' She encouraged us to be more ambitious, to take risks and not be afraid of failure — as long as we learned from our mistakes."

Montez graduated from Miami University of Ohio in 2001 and now works as a community education coordinator for an organ donor network. "I wouldn't be where I am today without MUSP."

Contact emeyerpeter@sm-usa.org *for more information. To contribute, contact Lisa Gooding, executive director of development, at* lgooding@sm-usa.org *or use the gift envelope included in this magazine.*

Shelly Reese is a freelance writer living in Cincinnati.