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# SAFETY NET

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*The Marianist Urban Students Program provides mentoring and support to vulnerable high school students, guiding them on a path to higher education.*

BY JAN D. DIXON

It's early morning when Alexis Clark, 18, boards a bus for an hour-long ride to Baldwin Wallace University in Berea, a suburb of Cleveland. She's been excited about college since she graduated last spring from Villa Angela-St. Joseph High School (VASJ), a Marianist-sponsored school on the southern shore

of Lake Erie in Cleveland. Had it not been for the Marianist Urban Students Program (MUSP), a scholarship and mentoring initiative funded by the Marianists, Alexis would not easily have made the transition to college. Not much has been easy for her.

"My dad was killed in a fight," says Alexis, explaining that he was trying to help someone. "I was very young."

In 2013, her mother, Valerie Short, was shot while pumping gas at a convenience store not far from their home. Caught in crossfire when men began shooting at each other, Valerie didn't realize she had been hit. "I got in my car, and didn't notice the pain in my hip until I sat down," she says.

Rushed to a nearby hospital, Valerie underwent surgery to repair her shattered hip. A month later, while still in recovery, she suffered a major stroke.

For the next several months, Alexis took charge of the household, looking after her three younger siblings, making sure they did their homework, were fed and got to school on time. "I helped my mom with everything," she says. "She couldn't do much."

Going to school was the easy part. "I wouldn't have made it last year had it not been for the people in the MUSP program," says Alexis. "They were always there for me. They had my back when I didn't have anyone else."

"Many of the students in the MUSP program come from inner-city neighborhoods that aren't safe," says Janice Roccasalva, chair of the advisory board for MUSP and a former principal at VASJ. "School is their home away from home and their safety net."

## Saving kids

Helping students feel safe, supported and valued is part of Tim Neary's job as director of MUSP. The students in the MUSP program "experience the typical pains of adolescence, but they have extra burdens," says Tim, acknowledging that the stress in their young lives comes from many sources. Their biggest worry

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— Janice Roccasalva, advisory board chair, MUSP

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**Opposite page:** Tim Neary, director of MUSP, with MUSP alumna Alexis Clark, her sister, Danyell Wilson, and their mother, Valerie Short





PHOTO: KEN BLAZE

*MUSP participant Sean Johns enjoys good-humored coaching from Tim Neary.*

is money. "Many parents have lost jobs or are just getting back on their feet. They are living paycheck-to-paycheck or receiving some type of assistance," says Tim.

The MUSP program was launched at VASJ in 1999 to help children living in impoverished households afford a Catholic high school education. But low income is not the only criterion for admittance to the program. "We look for children who are at risk of dropping out of high school," says Tim. "Even if they make it through their senior year, the ones that don't go on for more training and education are left with few good job opportunities. Our goal is to identify high-potential students who wouldn't go to college without MUSP."

Identifying these students means asking lots of questions: Is this a single-parent household? Who's their support system? Who are their role models? Without MUSP, where would they end up?

Not surprisingly, the students accepted into MUSP are vulnerable and need a lot of support. "Tim is more than the MUSP director. He's their guidance counselor, social worker, surrogate parent, cheerleader and coach," says Janice, who works with Tim and a 14-member MUSP board to select students each year for the program. "I wish we had 10 more like Tim Neary at this school. I think MUSP is saving kids."

### Close bonds

There are 23 students participating in MUSP at VASJ this year. The program can accommodate as many as 26. The students come from four Catholic elementary schools in the area. Each class, starting freshman year, admits six to eight students. The participants form tightknit bonds. "We've grown close, almost like brothers and sisters," says Sean Johns, a junior in the program who says he can talk with his MUSP friends about almost anything.

But it's Tim Neary to whom he looks for guidance. "I've learned that I'm not alone," says Sean, who lives with his mom, a single parent. "There is always someone here to help me, especially Mr. Neary. Sometimes, when my grades are down, he asks me, 'What are you doing? You can do better.' He sets the bar high, like a good coach."

Sean has watched his mother, Mary, juggle two low-paying jobs to make ends meet, working from 5 a.m. until 6 p.m. Still, it isn't enough, so this year Sean began working at a restaurant 10 hours a week to help with expenses. He's determined to go to college, a goal almost all the MUSP graduates achieve. "When I see how hard my mom works, it's a big motivator," he says.

## Savoring each success

Alexis Clark is thriving in her first year of college. Last fall, her younger sister, Danyell Wilson, followed in her footsteps and began her freshman year at VASJ through the MUSP program. Danyell wants to become a lawyer, "so I can help people find justice," she says. In her inner-city world, where violence, drug abuse and clashes with the law are common, she's witnessed her share of injustice.

Alexis also wants to make a difference in the lives of people who have been hurt. "I want to be a therapist so I can help people overcome trauma and live normal lives," she says.

Their ambitions are what keep Tim Neary going. "I'm inspired by the success stories that happen every day at VASJ, like the kid who comes in early to work on a paper because he doesn't have a computer at home," he says.

But he saves his greatest admiration for those who come back to school after graduation. "When I see kids go to college — reach that goal — and come back here so lit up, so excited. They just glow," he says. "It's the best part of my day, and I know that our hard work is paying off." ■

## HELP A STUDENT SUCCEED

You can help the MUSP program through a financial contribution. To make a donation now, please use the enclosed envelope or go to our website at [marianist.com/donate-to-musp](http://marianist.com/donate-to-musp). For more information, contact Allison Hewitt at 314.533.1207 or [ahewitt@sm-usa.org](mailto:ahewitt@sm-usa.org).



MUSP alumnus Jimmy McLeod Jr

## A RUNNING CHANCE

*Marianist Urban Students Program spurs students to cross the finish line.*

According to census data, 98 percent of adults living in South-Collinwood, an inner-city neighborhood in Cleveland, do not have a college degree. Jimmy McLeod Jr, 26, who grew up in this part of town, was determined to defy the odds. He credits the Marianist Urban Students Program (MUSP) at Villa Angela-St. Joseph for giving him a running chance.

Besides financial support, the program provided him with many resources. But it was MUSP's summer trip to visit college campuses that set Jimmy on a winning course. "I would never have attended Bowling Green State University without that trip," he says.

His path kept opening to bigger possibilities. After graduating college, he attended Loyola University Chicago and earned a master's degree in higher education. He was hired by the University of Dayton to work in administration.

A year ago, Jimmy spread his wings again and took a job at the University of Colorado Boulder. Recently, he was promoted to "first-year success advisor," a job designed to help first-generation college students, most of whom are people of color, stay in school. "I'm a catch-all campus resource person," says Jimmy. Recognizing the position is much like the MUSP director at VASJ, he marvels at the similarities. "I've come full circle," he says in amazement. "I love it."

## How MUSP works

The Marianist Urban Students Program operates in three Marianist high schools: Purcell Marian High School, Cincinnati; Villa Angela-St. Joseph High School, Cleveland; and Central Catholic High School, San Antonio.

Scholars from the MUSP program are typically "at-risk students," meaning they are at risk of underperforming or dropping out of school. MUSP provides students with mentoring and financial support. The Marianists pay two-thirds of the annual tuition fee for each MUSP student. The balance of the tuition is paid by the student's family as a personal investment.