

Changing the Picture of Education – One Student at a Time

Like thousands of high school students across the country, Whitney Cole has aspirations of becoming a lawyer. This summer she will attend the Intensive Law & Trial Forum at Stanford University Law School to explore a career in law, discuss legal ethics with Stanford Law professors, and get a head start on planning for college with her career goals in mind. Unlike most of her peers at this prestigious program, Whitney was at risk of failing academically as recently as the beginning of the past school year. At that point, she would have never imagined herself embarking on this journey.

Whitney was expelled from one Clark County high school during her sophomore year for behavioral issues. She had accumulated close to 60 absences during that year, and had a GPA of 1.2 when she began her junior year at Cimarron-Memorial High School last fall. On the Cimarron campus, Whitney was introduced to Communities In Schools of Nevada, and the CIS site coordinator, Ashley Burney.

Communities In Schools of Nevada is the local affiliate of the nation’s leading dropout prevention organization and is Nevada’s most effective intervention program. The CIS mission is to surround students with a community of support, empowering them to stay in school and achieve in life. The organization places site coordinators on campus to connect students and their families with critical services such as medical and dental care, mental health counseling services, food, clothing, tutoring, and other programs. Site coordinators are in school along with the students every day, developing relationships and advocating for the most at-risk students.

Whitney was referred to Burney and recommended for the CIS Academy. This high school program is a year-long course for students that incorporates mentoring, tutoring, life skill instruction, community service opportunities, career exploration, workforce readiness training, leadership training, and help with retrieval of needed credits. One-on-one case management by the site coordinator also plays a key role in the success of the CIS model.

“For the low-income, high-risk population we serve, the biggest void in many of these kids’ lives is a one-on-one caring relationship with an adult,” explains Diane Fearon, Chief Executive Officer of CIS of Nevada. “Our trained site coordinators provide that consistency every day throughout the school year.”



For Whitney, that connection provided the life changing inspiration she needed to turn herself around. “It makes a huge difference having that person at school,” she admits. “The beginning of the year started out like last year. I was with the same crew of people, my same clique... We were doing the same things we were doing last year, and I knew it wasn’t right.” Working with Burney gave her someone to talk to, and she found herself opening up and learning how to deal with the emotions and influences that had made it difficult for her to stay in school.

Life had not been easy for Whitney, as she rode an emotional roller coaster of turbulent family issues. Her mother struggled with alcohol addiction and her father wasn’t in the picture. She and her younger sister were taken in by their grandparents – a stable situation that was jarred by her sister’s diagnosis of Leukemia at age 5. “My younger sister got cancer, and that’s when I really started getting in trouble... Everything just went downhill from there. I got caught up with a lot of stuff and got expelled from school,” Whitney confesses. Although her sister’s treatment was successful, the family was dealt another emotional blow when Whitney’s grandfather passed away. The family moved from Mississippi to Las Vegas after his death, which proved to be a tough transition for a young teenager. “I just didn’t want to be in Mississippi without my Granddad,” Whitney says. “He was like my dad. He raised me. It was crazy, because I watched him die. I had to leave.”

The move to Las Vegas did not prove to be the fresh start that Whitney needed. She arrived with a severe credit deficiency from her freshman year, and in her sophomore year her behavior problems and school absences began to mount, resulting in another expulsion.

The comparison of that rock bottom to where she stands today with the help of CIS is like night and day. Whitney has no unexcused absences for the year, and has achieved a 3.5 GPA. She has made up all of her credits and completed additional coursework to put her ahead of the game going into senior year. She has passed three out of four of the proficiency tests needed to graduate. In addition to her trip to Stanford this summer, she will take 12th grade English, play tournament basketball and work a summer job.

Burney says that Whitney has become an inspiration for other CIS Academy students. She points to Whitney's determination and success when other students' confidence lags or academic challenges seem daunting. "I tell them to look at Whitney and what she's accomplished. When they can look to her and what she's done in just one year, there is no reason to even consider giving up," Burney says.

This type of success is not unusual for students served by Communities In Schools. Nationally, the organization serves 1.3 million young people and their families every year, and is the only dropout prevention organization proven to both decrease dropout rates and increase graduation rates. Of the students supported by the organization across 26 states and the District of Columbia, 96% of eligible seniors graduated and 97% of grade K-11 students moved on to the next grade on time. The organization reports that 86% of CIS students nationally met their high risk behavior reduction goals, and 99% stayed in school and on track to graduate.

Communities In Schools of Nevada operates in Clark County and Elko County school districts, serving an estimated 33,000 students during the 2013-2014 school year at 43 school sites. In these communities, hard hit by obstacles such as transiency, poverty and low academic expectations, CIS of Nevada reports that 86% of case-managed seniors graduated on time in 2012-2013, compared with the overall 63% graduation rate for the state. In 2012-2013, students case-managed by CIS of Nevada in grades K-12 89% had an improved attitude and commitment to school and 78% saw improved academics. It is stories like Whitney's that go beyond the numbers to really delve into what it means to transform a life through achievement in school.



Whitney Cole accepting the Cimarron High School CIS Academy Student of the Year award.

"To witness the success of my students brings so much joy to my heart," says Burney. "It starts with believing in them when they don't believe in themselves. To see their success unfold before my eyes lets me know the sky is the limit."

It is interesting that although Whitney seems like a different young woman today, she says she's always had the ability and desire, but she just needed the switch to be flipped. "I always knew I'd have a good future, but didn't know when was the time to start planning for that, to start trying to achieve the goals I want to achieve," she explains. Once closed and cautious, her anger and confusion made it almost impossible for her to make it through a full day at school. Now there is a brightness and confidence about her that is uplifting. She is eager to talk, clearly pleased with her accomplishments, and credits Burney with helping her get there.

"I made a choice," Whitney says of her newfound dedication to academics and her future goals. "If it wasn't for Ms. Burney, I wouldn't have made the choice. I would have kept doing what I'd been doing."

She continues, "She's the best. She gave me a big push. It's like I already knew what to do, but sometimes I need to hear it and Ms. Burney tells me. Sometimes I fall off track and Ms. Burney keeps me on. I don't want to let her down, so I always end up doing the right thing." Burney keeps in close contact with Whitney's grandmother, working together to support her newfound drive.



The one-on-one relationship developed between CIS site coordinator Ashley Burney and student Whitney Cole.

When asked what advice she would give a student who is facing similar challenges, Whitney recalls, “I was surrounded by negative people. I don’t know how many credits I was down, but it was a LOT. It was a period of time where I stopped. I couldn’t do it anymore. I talked to Ms. Burney and she helped me turn around.” She continues, “Find somebody positive. Talk to them and get all of the negativity out of your life.”

Burney plans to continue working with Whitney throughout her senior year, exploring post-secondary opportunities and financial aid options. “I feel the CIS model is highly effective in working with our students,” she says, referencing the “Five Basics” CIS strives to provide to every child. “The foundation starts with building a one-on-one relationship. Providing a safe place to learn and grow is essential. Establishing a marketable skill that can be used upon graduation builds over time. Creating an individual student plan has allowed me to help my students build on their strengths and develop skills. Over the course of this year I’ve seen Whitney grow and develop into a bright and caring individual. She understands the importance of giving back to peers and the community.”

In the upcoming school year, CIS of Nevada has plans to place dedicated site coordinators like Burney in 35 schools in Clark County, 6 schools in Elko County and will explore expanding into Washoe County schools. The goal is to reach

more students like Whitney, as well as to connect with students at a younger age to break through whatever barriers may prevent them from achieving.

The individualized approach to students’ welfare taken by CIS not only benefits the individual, but has a far-reaching ripple effect on the community. Data from a 2012 Alliance for Education study shows that high school graduates will be net contributors to their communities for an average of 44 years of their working life. Graduates use their increased income to purchase homes and cars, and pay taxes that support the community. An increased graduation rate will reduce spending on health and crime-related services. In examining the impact of Communities In Schools affiliates on the communities they serve, the study showed an average rate of return to society of 18.4%. In addition, every dollar invested in Communities in Schools creates \$11.60 of economic benefit to the community.

Although Whitney Cole is one student, she and others who may be struggling to stay in school will determine the future of Nevada. Communities In Schools of Nevada will be there, providing support and resources to help change the picture of education in our community.

For more information, visit cisnevada.org.