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NCC Helps Teen Empowerment Network Participants On The Road To College



Teen Empowerment Network (T.E.N.) Coordinator Michael Schiavo, left, works with Luis Santiago. Santiago, who is legally blind, has been accepted to Bloomfield College for the fall semester.

New Community recently launched the Teen Empowerment Network (T.E.N.), which aims to help high school juniors and seniors living in Newark prepare for college. One success story is Luis Santiago, a Central High School senior, who has been accepted to Bloomfield College.

Santiago hopes to become an animator and game designer, which drew him to Bloomfield College. The school offers an animation major with 2D and 3D concentrations. What makes the career goal unique for Santiago is that he's legally blind. He wears glasses, has a white cane to assist with walking and uses the app ZoomText on his iPad, which magnifies text and images on the screen.

The iPad is how Santiago draws his creations. He uses his finger to create original characters and make fan art of

existing franchises like Pokemon.

"They have a couple of apps on the App Store [for animation]," Santiago said. "I chose to do it on my iPad because you don't have to keep spending money on pencils and papers and markers and all that. Up until now I've been using my finger but I'm planning on getting a pen."

Santiago is a self-taught artist who began drawing seriously during his junior year of high school. He's even been commissioned to draw some pieces.

Santiago first found out about T.E.N. through his guidance counselor. He is part of the first group of students to participate, completing two semesters with the program. Each semester lasts 12 weeks.

T.E.N. Coordinator Michael Schiavo wrote the program with New Community Chief of Health and Human Services Arti Kakkar and NCC Program Manager Dametria Wertz. Funding for T.E.N. comes from the Essex County Department of Citizen Services, Youth Service Commission's Juvenile Justice Program.

"The program is designed to provide participating youth with hands-on experience in working with professional staff in areas of their interest with financial incentive upon completion of the program," Kakkar said. "T.E.N. also addresses positive social development, teaches participants to act as ambassadors to their school and neighborhood and to mentor and lead other students to make positive and responsible decisions. It is our goal to develop a team of youth ambassadors that will become role models and solicit other students for program expansion."

T.E.N. is open to high school juniors and seniors living in Newark who have a GPA of 3.0 and above. It provides college preparation, which includes SAT workshops; help with college essays and applications; and helping students strengthen their math, language arts, writing, speaking and reading skills. T.E.N. also works with parents to fill out financial aid forms including the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

"A lot of this is working with parents too. They're just not aware of the things that are there for them," Schiavo said. "The follow-up is important. And a lot of these parents don't have time for the follow-up because they're working all the time. Or they're taking care of children or what have you. You're an advocate basically. And that's what we do."

The program has started out with four students per semester and eight per year. The goal is to grow T.E.N. to serve double the number of students. Staff members plan to apply for additional funding to achieve that goal.

Students have come from Central High School, John F. Kennedy School and Montclair Immaculate Conception High School so far. Schiavo hopes to expand to more high schools going forward. Interested students must fill out an application for T.E.N.

T.E.N. students participate three days per week. On Mondays they work with Schiavo and NCC Fellow Anna Kapolka at 274 South Orange Ave., Newark. Tuesdays and Thursdays they go to their work assignments. They work at after-school programs at Harmony House, New Community's transitional housing facility for homeless families; the NCC Neighborhood Center; and Community Hills Early Learning Center. Sessions run from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. and students receive \$11 per hour for their time.

Part of T.E.N. is also ensuring participating students are staying on the right path. There is a drug education component to deter drug use.



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“During the time spent in T.E.N. the students have improved academically and have been exposed to a variety of post high school education paths and career exploration,” said NCC Director of Youth Services Edward Morris. “Although we have a small group in the program, it’s the effectiveness and the outcomes, not the numbers that are most important.”

Schiavo knows how to work with young people. He was a teacher at 13th Avenue School in Newark for 24 years and served as a principal in West Orange for 18 years. After 42 years in education, he retired. He’s happy to be working with students again and making a difference in their lives.

“I’m back doing some of the things I love to do,” he said.

Santiago, who is the youngest of five children, graduates from Central High School June 19. He will take a few courses over the summer at Bloomfield College and then enroll full-time in the fall.

“It’s helped me a lot,” Santiago said of T.E.N. “It helped me to be more social. It helped with my college essay. I would definitely recommend it to other students.”

Helping Santiago get into Bloomfield College has been gratifying for Schiavo. He believes Santiago has a bright future ahead of him.

“I truly believe he’s going to be an animator,” Schiavo said. “His pictures are amazing.”