

# This Posse is a Support Group...

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WALTHAM - As parents helped nervous freshmen move into Brandeis University dormitories for the first time yesterday, another group of first-year students were feeling at home.

The 10 students, mingling with professors and college administrators during their second day on campus, had the benefit of each other's company to help them through the rite of passage of going off to college.

The freshman, who all hail from New York City, comprise the second group of Posse to enter Brandeis. Posse, now 10 years old, recruits a diverse group of motivated students to bond and attend college together.

To date, the organization has sent 135 New York City students to six colleges across the nation. Brandeis graduate Debbie Bial founded the program because of a comment a dropout student made to her. The student told her he would have been able to survive the rigors of college life if only he had his "posse" with him.

Bial formed Posse to substitute for the support network the students would leave behind in attending college. The program seeks out students with varied backgrounds and skills who, over an eight-month period during their senior year of high school, get together for workshops and dinners before they head off as a group to the same college.

The aim of the program is to bring diversity to colleges with students who demonstrate leadership skills. The program, which offers full scholarships, is extremely competitive. There were 700 applicants for the 40 open slots this year, Bial said.

"We're not using traditional methods to find the students," Bial said.

High school transcripts and SATs offer some indication of a student's success. But leadership potential and an outgoing nature are other less obvious ways to spot outstanding students.

Jasmine Vallejo, 18, was intrigued by her high school counselor's description of the program but never expected to be a Posse member.

"It's one of the best things that's ever happened in my life," Vallejo said.

Vallejo, who comes from the Bronx, knew of friends who went through culture shock during their first year of college. The bonds she has formed with fellow Posse members have eased her nervousness about college.

"As a group, you learn to be confident, and then you branch out," she said. "We formed this bond, it's like a family. We're not afraid to let our feelings out."

Tamyra Meaders, 18, of Staten Island, learned she wasn't so different from other young people in New York, even if she felt segregated by a body of water.

Another resident of Staten Island, Kyung Ruscitti, was intrigued by the program because of the scholarship. But as a member of the high school conflict resolution team, Ruscitti saw that his love for learning about other people's life stories would serve him well as a part of Posse.

A late drive to Boston with several of the Posse members, in search of a midnight snack this past weekend, demonstrated how the group shares trials and triumphs. The teens learned the hard way, Boston doesn't stay open all night as New York City does.

"I was thinking about how it would have been if they weren't there," Ruscitti said. "I would have been lost in Boston and hungry alone. It's having a close knit groups of friends. It's almos as if I never left. They took a chunk of New York and brought it here."

The students, who represent the melting pot of America, add diversity to the campus without quotas. As affirmative action has faced legal challenges in other states, many universities have struggled with ways to attract a mix of students.

Posse provides one answer.

"These are stellar kids who sometimes get missed by university admissions," Bial said.

Mignon Duffy, the Posse mentor at Brandeis, predicts the students will do well based on her observations.

"They're a strong group, very supportive of each other," she said. "They are strong themselves and are committed to the success of the group."