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Achievement up as more grab hold of promise

BY LORI HIGGINS
FREE PRESS EDUCATION WRITER

KALAMAZOO -- Danielle Harik may never know whom to thank for the four years of debt-free college she just spent at Western Michigan University. So she's saying thanks the only way she can. She's giving back by volunteering in her community.

So is WMU student Jeremiah Minar. For these Kalamazoo Promise recipients -- who are among the first group to graduate from a four-year university -- the scholarship is spurring a sense of altruism as they try to find ways to demonstrate their appreciation for the money.

"The Promise is such a great gift," Minar said. "It's not just for the students. It's for the community."

More than 1,500 graduates of Kalamazoo Public Schools have shared in \$17 million doled out from the Promise, which covers all or a portion of tuition and fees for students who have been in the district since at least ninth grade.

The recipients are full of gratitude toward the anonymous donors who gave them a shot at a college education.

"I don't even know if I could find the words if they were to stand in front of me," said Torian Johnson, a music major at WMU. "To me, it still

feels kind of unreal that I go to school for free."

Kalamazoo Promise scholarship benefits city, its kids

In four years, the Kalamazoo Promise has sent hundreds of students to college, boosted enrollment in the local school district, increased test scores and been the model for how to make a difference in one community.

But the real impact of the revolutionary scholarship program that's paying tuition for graduates of Kalamazoo Public Schools isn't in the numbers. It's in the stories of the college seniors who are among the first to graduate from universities next month.

For them, the Kalamazoo Promise brought opportunity.

Without the Promise, Kyle Quakenbush wouldn't be close to earning a bachelor's degree in aviation. Torian Johnson wouldn't have studied in Australia for five months. Jeremiah Minar wouldn't have saved enough money to plan a post-graduation move to Chicago to seek employment. Danielle Harik wouldn't be headed to medical school debt-free.

"I don't know if anyone can really know how amazing this was for us," said Harik, who along with Quakenbush, Johnson and Minar is a Western Michigan University student.

It's all thanks to anonymous donors driven to

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revitalize the economy in the Kalamazoo region by investing in education, a gamble that is paying off for students. The donors launched the program in November 2005, handing out the first scholarships to the Class of 2006.

Had it not been for the Promise

To date, about 1,500 of the district's graduates have received about \$17 million in scholarships. Between 50 and 75 of those students are graduating from four-year colleges across the state this spring -- 21 of them from WMU, where the first group of Promise recipients also received free room and board.

The first Promise graduate, Stacy Westhoff, beat fellow recipients to the finish line by graduating early from WMU in December. In different ways, grads tell similar tales of how the Promise not only made college a reality but opened up many other opportunities they didn't think were possible.

Quakenbush, 21, had aspired to enroll in the aviation program at WMU, one of the top aviation programs in the country. But he figured he would have to start at a community college, then transfer to WMU. That combination could have taken years.

When the Promise became a reality, Quakenbush -- like so many other recipients -- was incredulous.

"I don't know how to explain it. It just turned our entire plans around," he said.

Harik, 22, likely would have spent her free time working, and not involved in extracurricular activities at WMU -- including a stint her junior year as student body president -- had it not been for the Promise.

Now she's set to enter medical school at Michigan State University, a costly choice that doesn't seem so bad now that she spent four years at WMU for free.

"Going in loan-free is probably the most incredible thing. ... It just makes that further education that much easier," she said.

The Promise didn't guarantee everyone a debt-free education. The amount of tuition the program pays is related to how many years the student was in the city's public schools. Quakenbush ended up taking out loans over the four years because the aviation program at WMU comes with expensive flight lab fees -- something the Promise doesn't cover.

The Promise has spawned a student organization at WMU, called the Kalamazoo Promise Service and Leadership Development Organization, that has as its main project a mentorship program between Promise scholars and Kalamazoo Public Schools students.

Still a struggle for some

Being among the first Promise graduates is special.

"It's such an accomplishment for anybody to graduate from college and get a bachelor's degree," said Johnson, 21, who is to graduate with a degree in music May 1. "But at the same time, we knew, the first generation, the

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responsibility that was on us to go and make something of ourselves and to use this opportunity and this money very wisely."

While the numbers of students taking advantage of the scholarship are promising, there are some students who have struggled. About a third of the students who attended community colleges and about 10% of those who went to four-year universities have lost the scholarship at some point because they didn't maintain the required 2.0 grade point average.

But Bob Jorth, executive administrator for the Kalamazoo Promise, said a significant portion of those students manage to turn their grades around and have their scholarship restored.

At both WMU and Kalamazoo Valley Community College, there have been efforts to provide assistance to Promise students to ensure their success in college. Western Michigan hired Patricia Williams, a former teacher and administrator in Kalamazoo Public Schools. As an education facilitator, she teaches a first-year seminar that most incoming Promise students take, where she gives them strategies that can help them be successful, including knowing what professors are looking for, note-taking skills, class participation and career exploration. During the academic year she meets regularly with the students to monitor their progress and to provide assistance.

The office also tapped Montez Moreales, a coordinator of college visitation activities, to create one of several programs to encourage middle school students to start thinking about college. The result was an effort that began this year to bring every sixth-grader in the district to WMU for a day of activities.

Aaliyah Garel-Fields, 12, was one of those sixth-graders who visited campus on a recent Monday. She and her classmates walked around campus in yellow T-shirts with the words "Class of 2016" emblazoned on the back. They ate lunch alongside college students, toured the campus

and attended a session in which they learned how the classes they're taking now will prepare them for college.

"It was good," Aaliyah said. "We got to experience how it would be in college."

Waiting for economic impact

From the beginning, when it was announced in November 2005, the Kalamazoo Promise was about more than scholarships. Though the donors were and still are anonymous, their gift was interpreted by many to be about spurring economic development in the Kalamazoo region through education.

Michelle Miller-Adams, visiting researcher at the Kalamazoo-based W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, said many of the economic gains predicted four years ago -- such as strong housing prices as more people moved into the area -- have yet to materialize.

"I don't think it's a huge surprise," said Miller-Adams, who has been researching the impact of the Promise and has written about it in her book -- "The Power of a Promise: Education and Economic Renewal in Kalamazoo." "I think the broader economic climate has really tamped down the potential economic impact of the

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Kalamazoo Promise," she said.

That's not to say there have been no positive signs. A large number of Promise students -- 342 -- attended school locally, at either WMU or Kalamazoo Valley Community College.

"It's meaningful because their school money has stayed local and their spending has stayed local. And we have the opportunity to connect them with the local work force," Miller-Adams said.

Some of the Promise recipients have plans to leave Michigan after graduation. Minar, 21, an economics major, is planning a move to Chicago. He doesn't have a job, but he is optimistic he will find one by the end of the summer.

"I just want to try out a different city. ... After I do that, then I can come back to Kalamazoo and maybe start a family," he said.

The Chicago move would be difficult without the Promise, he said. No tuition or room and board fees for four years meant he could save enough money from jobs to finance his move.

"This is giving me more room to maneuver and figure out what's right for me," Minar said.

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