Five years ago, I met the first students of a newly created organization my fellow founders and I called College Bound. Two of us had just lost the safety of salaried jobs to put a stake in the ground for higher education and those least likely to access it. Ayriel, a 16-year-old from UCHS, told us that day, “I’ll be tough enough, or this little idea of yours is gonna fall apart real fast.” I am grateful we didn’t know then what Herculean reserves of stamina, will and patience would be required of us, or we would have pulled up the stakes right then and there.

The idea for College Bound began when my son was a junior at John Burroughs. Parents were flying their kids across the country from UPenn to Berkeley and laying down $2,000 for SAT tutors. Despite astonishingly good support from Burroughs, many parents hired private counselors to give their children an even greater edge in the application process.

My high school experience was very different. I grew up in Newark, NJ, the daughter of a single mom and first grade teacher. The houses on my block were down-at-the-heels; my neighbors were all modestly employed or poor. Our neighborhood grocery store was ShopRite, where we often went after school. On one particular occasion, I remember my mother telling me we couldn’t buy lettuce because there were migrant workers in California who were being mistreated. I didn’t know what a migrant worker was, and California was not near the No. 14 bus line or anywhere we took the car on weekends.

So the daughter of a school teacher and activist had, as an adult, become familiar with privilege but was never quite comfortable with it. When I had the experience of seeing how it informed the higher education options of the wealthy, I couldn’t get a powerful sense of inequity out of my mind. It’s not that I thought it was wrong for parents to take advantage of resources that were available to them; I just kept asking myself what was happening to the kids in the neighborhoods where I grew up. I had thought that college admission and completion was a meritocracy, but it appeared that higher education had more to do with the family you were born into than how hard you worked.

Ayriel’s warning that we had better “toughen up” was prophetic. We realized quickly that while these kids definitely needed the test preparation and quality college counseling we were providing, they also needed bus fare, eyeglasses, jobs, a safe place to go at night and crisis counseling. We changed our program radically to include transportation stipends, meals, cultural outings, community service, job shadowing, internships and financial literacy. At the heart of everything we did was a relentless determination to get every single student we served out of generational poverty and into the middle class.

The result was truly transformational. Five years later, our students are on track to graduate college at the same rate as students coming out of John Burroughs, MICDS and the nation’s highest income families.

Here’s what I’ve learned: We don’t realize our goals without the baggage or blessing of the families we were born into. Our loss are cast together, our lives and futures interwoven, and because of that, I have hope. I have hope because I’ve seen how a single mom, who cared about a migrant worker whom she had never met from a state she had never visited, created the spark that would become a movement launching 1,500 students into a life of dignity and prosperity.

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