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Sister Mentors

When you think of a Ph.D., “you think of a man standing in front of the room teaching,” says Roxie Jairrels, a high school senior from Alexandria, Va. who hopes to push that preconception until it pops. “I’m going for my bachelor’s and then my master’s and if it were possible to get my Ph.D. in photography, I would go for that. Even if they create it when I’m 40, I’ll do it.”

Among the middle and high school girls in [SisterMentors](#), few words prove more powerful than that collection of three letters: “P,” “H,” “D.” They’re reminded of the word’s significance by doctoral candidates at least monthly, and the old-timers in the program, like Ruhama Yared, a 10th-grader originally from Ethiopia, can recite what the letters mean by heart: “After your master’s degree, you write a dissertation, a book, and people call you a doctor,” Yared says.

But don’t be fooled. These aren’t professors’ kids, accustomed to talk of Derrida and deconstruction at the dinner



Elizabeth Redden

Sister Mentors: Adriane Williams, a Ph.D. candidate, and Lorena Granados, a high school student, join in during a small-group discussion of *The Color Purple*.



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SisterMentors girls. From left: Kedest Firdaweke, Jessye Jairrels, Shireen K. Lewis (director), Roxie Jairrels, Cindy Ayala, Ruth and Ruhama Yared.

table. Instead, these are largely low-income students, first-generation college hopefuls who benefit from a unique D.C.-area program working to nudge girls and women of color through the notoriously leaky academic pipeline at all levels.

SisterMentors will send its first group of five high school students off to college this September, just as the organization, which started as a dissertation support group in 1997 and expanded to mentor young girls in 2001, celebrates its 10th anniversary. The essence of the program is simple, but significant: Female minority doctoral candidates living and working in the D.C. area while they write their dissertations benefit from mentoring one another through a long (they'll say prolonged) process. They then "pay it forward," so to speak, in their work mentoring the middle and high school girls (many of whom, it's worth noting, are avid young volunteers themselves). More minority girls go to college, with the hope that more minority women will be there ready to teach them.

To date, 25 women of color have completed their dissertations with the help of SisterMentors, and college acceptance letters for the girls are rolling on in: thick envelopes from the Art Institute of Pittsburgh, Duke, Hampton, Radford and Virginia Commonwealth Universities and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"If we are going to tell girls in our program that they should go to college, we should be providing them with professors who look like them standing in front of the classroom," says Shireen K. Lewis, a Trinidad native with a doctorate in French from Duke University who founded SisterMentors in 1997. The program exists, Lewis says, on one level because although 50.9 percent of the total doctorates awarded in 2004 went to women, only 11.2 percent of those went to women of color (numbers she compiled based on National Science Foundation statistics).

On another level, SisterMentors exists because the pipeline starts leaking well before many girls even learn what a Ph.D. is. The disparities at the Ph.D. level, Lewis says, can be traced not only to a lack of funding to support the dissertation phase — the working women in the program don't have the luxury to focus solely on their dissertations and in many cases work for nonprofits — but also the lack of mentoring throughout the entire educational process.

"Ph.D.'s tackling social problems," says Lewis, who has a law degree from the University of Virginia in addition to her doctorate. "Everyone hears about children dropping out of school, that there are low graduation rates among children of color. We said, 'We can do something about it.'"

"I think Ph.D.'s have a special role to play."

To Mentor and Be Mentored

The women of SisterMentors meet for monthly sessions with a group of 30 African American, Latina and Asian American girls, ages 11 to 17, from a low-income section of Alexandria, a D.C. suburb. The girls take annual college trips, and are about to head to a youth hostel in Harlem for a four-day immersive tour of Columbia and New York Universities. "I hate [traditional] college tours — this building, that building, this statue. No, that's not what we're here for," says Lewis. The girls will instead bustle by the statues without stopping and actually wander through the buildings as they sample college life: They'll eat in the dining hall, visit classes and meet with minority women.

At the monthly, three-hour mentoring sessions at an Alexandria library, the Ph.D. candidates read with the girls, stressing comprehension and vocabulary: "I learned new words that I wouldn't have known about, like profound, and I'm gonna use it," Shariya Scott, a middle-schooler, said after reading an excerpt of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* during this Saturday's mentoring session. The doctoral candidates tell the girls each and every session what a Ph.D. is, pass positive thoughts around a circle, and talk about the importance of attending college — and beyond. They discuss the girls' short and long-term goals, ranging from losing a few pounds before prom to getting a full college scholarship.

The goal-setting is very much akin to the process the Ph.D. candidates undergo at their own mentoring sessions held once every three weeks. "The idea is to set long and short-term goals and to be accountable for those goals to the group," says LaNitra Walker, a Duke University Ph.D. candidate writing her art history dissertation inbetween her work promoting international education at the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education. "It gets you to break the dissertation down into pieces. That's the real hurdle that people don't always see right away. It's a

huge project and it's easy to get lost in it. But if you break it down into smaller and smaller units and you accomplish something at regular intervals, eventually you look around and you've gotten a chapter down or the whole book down."

In December, Walker finished a full draft. "That was something," she says, "that probably would not have happened without the group."

Many of the dissertators involved in SisterMentors work in the non-profit world, and while alumni have landed tenure-track jobs at institutions like Catholic, Ohio State and Texas A & M Universities, many women choose to continue working in non-profits after successfully defending their dissertations. Lewis, for one, just started getting paid for her work as the founder of EduSeed, SisterMentor's parent organization, two years ago. For years prior, she'd worked 80-hour weeks and two full-time jobs: Consulting (that paid the bills) and directing SisterMentors (that did not).

"Now I'm doing this full-time; it's like two or three full-time jobs," Lewis says. She's used to hard work – "I used to be a lawyer in New York City," she says with a shrug – but is hoping to hire staff soon and to expand the program to other locations in the Washington area. SisterMentors is the only initiative currently operated by EduSeed, the nonprofit parent organization dedicated to promoting education among historically disadvantaged groups. But Lewis hopes that the umbrella organization will soon grow as well.

EduSeed has raised about \$20,000 for SisterMentors so far this year in private donations and foundation grants, bringing the non-profit organization about a sixth of the way toward the goal of raising \$120,000 by year's end. All of SisterMentors' initiatives – including a writing retreat held earlier this month for dissertators in the West Virginia mountains, the annual college tours, and an annual etiquette workshop for the girls — are entirely funded by donations and available to participants at no cost.

Adriane Williams, who is finishing her dissertation for a doctorate in educational policy studies from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, sees parallels between the experiences of many of the minority girls striving to be the first in their families to attend college and the SisterMentors women. The lack of tradition and lack of role models can eat away at ambition at all levels, she says. "Even just as someone who was once these girls, I know how important it is to be able to say, these dreams that I have, this desire that I have to do something better, can be a reality. When you come from certain neighborhoods and low economic backgrounds, there's no way for you to know that it's possible. You don't even know what a Ph.D. is."

"Some of us are the only people in our very large families who even went to college, let alone got a master's degree, but a Ph.D.? What is that? What is that to the people who love us?"

"In the end, it really is about the educational pathway, and girls not finishing school and not being able to take advantage of postsecondary options, not really understanding goal-setting and having a dream," Williams says. "We're both in the process; we're all in the process of trying to fulfill a dream. And we need some help."

— Elizabeth Redden

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at <http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/03/27/sistermentors>.

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