

# The Homewood Star

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## Foundation brings elite schools in reach of low-income students

by SYDNEY CROMWELL

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Photo courtesy of the College Choice Foundation.



When he sits down to interview a student, Mark Bateman always asks, "How big do you want your world to be?"

Whatever their answer is, he and the College Choice Foundation strive to make it bigger.

For students from low-income families, their world of college choices can be incredibly narrow. The initial sticker price of top-level and private schools means most families will rule those out in favor of a public university close to home. In some cases, getting a college education is simply out of reach.

"For some of these families ... if there's a hidden fee, she's coming home because there is no cushion, at all," said College Choice Foundation co-founder and President Josephine Lowery.

Those families may not realize, however, that elite universities are often more able to provide the financial aid that they need. CCF serves as a bridge between low-income Homewood families and colleges that can meet their needs.

It's how 2016 Homewood High graduate Sean Conboy, who had planned to apply to three in-state schools and worried about paying his application fees, is now a freshman at Boston College. It's how current HHS senior Alexander Wilson was handed a list of 20 universities that fit both his interests and his family's budget.

"I still remember looking at it and being baffled that it was realistic that I was going to end up going to one of these colleges," Wilson said.

#### Making choices

CCF started out more simply. Lowery and co-founder Nancy Hale hired Bateman, who had years of research on college decision-making under his belt, to help their own kids make the right college choice. There's so much more to the process than just the application — tours, repeated ACT or SAT testing, essays, interviews and more — that both Homewood residents wanted an expert hand to guide them toward the best fit.

Meanwhile, Bateman wanted to use his expertise to help students whose finances limited their chances for college education.

His years of research had shown that a student going to college, particularly the first in the family, is significant not only for that child's future but also the "family trajectory" for parents and siblings.

Lowery, who had grown up receiving food stamps herself, found their first recipient almost literally in her own backyard: Michelle Williams, her landscaper's daughter.

That was nearly three years ago. Williams and Conboy are two of four CCF students currently in college, and all have their tuition covered by scholarships and need-based aid.

"What we try to do is find the best fit for our students, as well as a school that they can afford. So it just turns out that more elite schools can afford to support them, and they're looking for our type of students," Hale said.

CCF finds potential Homewood students to help through teachers, counselors and even recommendations from students already familiar with the program.

Most students' families have an income between \$20,000 and \$40,000 per year, though Lowery noted one student's mother makes only \$10,000 per year. When they choose to work with a student, the CCF board and volunteers become like a second family. Wilson compared it to having "five moms."

They take the college application process to a depth that the average school counselor can't match. Whether through weekly meetings or group text conversations, the CCF team is helping them manage their grades, write and edit application essays, fill out the FAFSA for financial aid and meet deadlines.

CCF pays for application fees and drives students to tutoring or ACT prep courses when needed, just to remove one more barrier that might keep a child from attending college. In addition, they have to figure out the best fit for each student, find colleges that match those criteria and, when possible, organize campus visits.

"She [Lowery] has been micromanaging my life ever since," said senior Frank Trujillo, joking about being accepted into the foundation.

That's why, Lowery said, right now the foundation can only handle about two seniors and two juniors per school year. This year they chose to exceed that number and accept four seniors and one junior, due to the number of outstanding applicants.

"It takes a lot of hours and work and compassion to take each one of these students and give them what they need," Lowery said.

One special project for Lowery is to create a dossier on each student. The dossiers, compiled in huge binders, give the students and their parents the chance to tell their story and explain their needs, as well as the students' goals for the future. As CCF students send their applications, Lowery also sends a copy of their dossier to each school.

When students can't travel to some of their chosen universities for interviews, Lowery said receiving that large binder in the mail can make the difference for admissions officers.

"The deans of admissions we've spoken to — which have been about four or five — have said that package completes their image of the student," Lowery said.

### Rising to the challenge

CCF pushes their students hard, and it's no easy task when a student is applying to 10 schools. However, board member Cassandra Joseph said it's gratifying to see these high school students rise to the challenge.

"I think they surprise themselves, even. I really think that they have seen themselves accomplish things that they didn't think they could do," Joseph said.

The application process can be eye-opening for students like Trujillo, who said, without CCF, he would have only applied to Auburn and Alabama because "that's just where everybody else goes." His list now includes Tufts University in Boston, Berea College in Kentucky, Pomona College in California and Amherst College in Massachusetts, and Trujillo wants to study architecture.

"It's made me realize college is a lot more than what I thought before," said senior Angelica Everson. "Mostly because of College Choice, I found out about some colleges I never would have thought of or been interested in."

It can be world-changing for their families, too. Lowery said some of her CCF students' younger siblings are now seeing college as a possibility for themselves because of their brother's or sister's opportunity. Bateman recalled one father was convinced, right up until the day he dropped his daughter off at her chosen university, that the scholarship money they had been promised would not actually be provided.

“So they don’t even try because they just can’t imagine,” Bateman said.

When the CCF team successfully sees a student enter freshman year, Lowery said it’s as emotional as if they were sending their own sons or daughters. But it’s not the end of their relationship.

“We don’t drop them at the school’s door,” Bateman said. “We keep up with them. We really look at this as about an eight-year process, in that they’re going to go to college and most of them are going to go to graduate school.”

CCF became a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit in summer 2016 and held its first fundraiser. Lowery said they want to be able to provide more support, both financially and through volunteer mentors. CCF also has the Julian G. Finley Scholars Fund, set up in memory of a Rosedale resident and 1979 HHS alumnus who Lowery said was a model for reaching his fullest potential and breaking down barriers. One student receives the Scholars Fund each year to help pay for expenses like books.

Their next fundraiser is the CCF Wild West Showdown, to be held at Good People Brewery with food by Little Donkey.

Bateman said someday he would like to see this sort of college support system in place for every Homewood student on free and reduced lunches, as it helps lift up not only those students but the entire city when they achieve their goals. For students like Wilson, the CCF is a “blessing that came out of nowhere.”

“We’re just one big family figuring out where we’re going to college,” Wilson said.

Visit [collegechoicefoundation.org](http://collegechoicefoundation.org) to learn more about the work of the College Choice Foundation.

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