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Kids with a parent in prison often struggle in life. Education nonprofit is changing that

Jim Hummel The Rhode Island Spotlight

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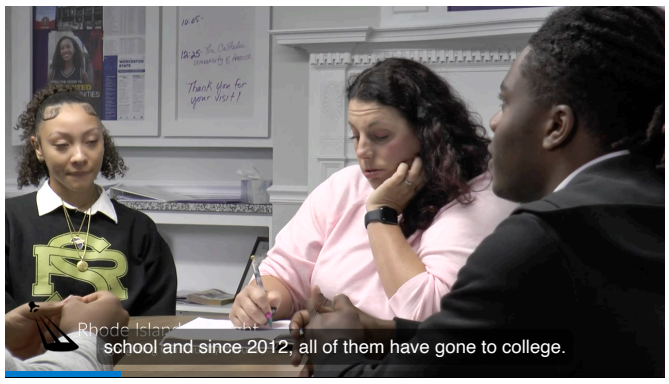

Rising Above Challenges: RISE helps hundreds of children with parents who have gone to prison

For the past 25 years, the nonprofit Rhode Islanders Sponsoring Education has provided scholarships, and mentors, for hundreds of children with parents who have gone to prison.

Key Points

- The nonprofit Rhode Islanders Sponsoring Education is marking its 25th year of helping children with one or more parents in prison break the cycle of poverty, unemployment, addiction and abuse.
- The mentoring program runs from age 7 to 14, while the scholarship program begins with students entering 5th grade. Over 20 years, 60 private and parochial schools have accepted students from RISE.
- Its results have been impressive: 100% of the students on scholarship have graduated from high school; since 2012, every graduate has gone to college.

On a gorgeous Saturday in late October, 20 students are spending their morning inside the cafeteria at Providence's La Salle Academy. They could be anywhere else on this mild fall day, but they gather to write thank-you notes to dozens of sponsors who are helping to pay tuition for them – and several dozen others – at 18 private schools across Rhode Island.

The young men and women come from different backgrounds and varying parts of Rhode Island, but all have something in common: One or more of their parents has been incarcerated. And they are all part of a nonprofit program called Rhode Islanders Sponsoring Education.

RISE is marking its 25th anniversary with an impressive record of results: 100% of the students who are on scholarship have graduated from high school; since 2012, every graduate has gone to college.

Kaitlin Della Grotta, center, executive director of Rhode Islanders Sponsoring Education, with RISE scholarship students who attend St. Raphael Academy in Pawtucket. From left: God'iss Santos, Khamari Brown, Aaron Julius and Dazayah Cosme. *Kris Craig/The Providence Journal*

"You want them to know that you're here, and there's a group of kids in this program that have been through the same thing you have been through," said Kaitlin Della Grotta, who has been with RISE for 12 years, the last three as executive director.

Della Grotta has become like a family member to many of the students and their parents, as she oversees a program that is providing scholarships and mentors for more than 50 children this year.

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“They know they can text me or call me whenever they want, and they do,” Della Grotta said. “It’s very humbling to be a part of their lives because of everything they’ve been through. They don’t have to trust me, but they do, and I’m so grateful for it.”

How did RISE get started?

RISE was founded in 1997 by two doctors at Brown University: Kevin Vigilante and Timothy Flanigan, who were working with addicted and incarcerated women. They wanted to find a way to break the cycle of poverty, unemployment, drug addiction and sexual abuse passed from generation to generation of those who went to prison. Their focus at the time was on children of women in prison.

Seven years after founding RISE, they expanded to include children with fathers in prison; today, that is the majority of the dozens of students in the program.

Children of incarcerated parents "were born into a situation where they have this massive strike against them," said Robin Boss, president of RISE's board of directors. "So how do we level the playing field as much as we can?" *Rhode Island Spotlight*

“They didn’t choose [this life],” said Robin Boss, the president of RISE’s board of directors. “They were born into a situation where they have this massive strike against them. So how do we level the playing field as much as we can?”

The mentoring program typically runs from age 7 to 14, while the scholarship program begins with students entering fifth grade. A total of 60 private and parochial schools over the last two decades have accepted students from RISE, which provides tuition assistance to backfill financial aid from each school, along with a stipend for books and other expenses.

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It’s a compelling story when RISE approaches donors for financial support, because they have an opportunity to see the results – and hear directly from the students they support.

“You can literally see how it’s impacting them,” Della Grotta said. “Because you get their report card, and you get to meet them, and you get to see what they’re doing. You send in a donation [to another nonprofit], you might not see that.”

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In late summer, Kaitlin Della Grotta, center left, greets one of the more than 100 people who came to RISE's back-to-school cookout on Pitman Street, adjacent to the nonprofit's headquarters in Providence. *Rhode Island Spotlight*

Della Grotta presides over an annual back-to-school gathering in mid-August that’s like a big family reunion. This year they brought in food trucks and gave out stacks of school supplies.

She also meets with each of the students on scholarship at their schools twice a year, just to check in, as she did one day recently with the four who are attending St. Raphael Academy in Pawtucket. “It’s a chance for you just to sit down one-on-one and not be distracted … where they’re running off to practice, or homework or their afterschool job,” she said.

An early success story: 'They don't let you fall'

Britnie Dawkins was among the early RISE scholarship recipients in the late 1990s. RISE help her go to the former Holy Name of Jesus School on Providence's East Side. Both of her parents had been in and out of prison.

When she was diagnosed with Crohn's disease and missed long stretches of middle school, RISE stepped in when she was on the verge of being kicked out.

"Because I was so sick, and it was so sudden, they were the reason I was able to stay at Holy Name," said Dawkins. "They were the voice for me back then."

RISE also connected Dawkins with a mentor.

"I could call her anytime, and she was there," Dawkins said. "She was a grown woman and she had time for little old me, with all of my problems."

Britnie Dawkins was part of the RISE program in the 1990s, when both her parents spent time in prison. She said the scholarship and mentoring she received helped her face that challenge and stay in school when she missed time due to Crohn's disease. *Rhode Island Spotlight*

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Dawkins' son, Christian, whose father was also in prison, now attends La Salle Academy on a RISE scholarship.

"They don't let you fall," she added. "If your kid starts to struggle in school, they don't let your kid fall. They hold on, they pull together. They do what they can do to make sure you succeed. That's what RISE is – it's a family."

Mentors provide stability, encouragement

Ed and Rena Wing have been mentors for the same student the last seven years. Dr. Edward J. Wing is the former dean of the medical school at Brown University and was introduced to RISE by co-founder Dr. Timothy Flanigan, who brought him to a board meeting.

"The early data from RISE was compelling," Wing said. "If [the students] could be mentored and get scholarships to high schools, then the cycle was broken. That was a very powerful message."

Wing joined the board (he is currently the vice president) and was later paired with a boy who is now a senior at Central High School. His parents were divorced, with one in prison; the family had moved often.

RISE executive director Kaitlin Della Grotta talks with Donald Young, left, and Amari Montiero in October when they and other students gathered at La Salle Academy to work on thank-you notes to their sponsors. *Rhode Island Spotlight*

The Wings have been a constant in the young man's life. Ed Wing said they often play basketball together at Brown or go out for a meal. They've also been to the Wings' home in Jamestown to sail and swim. "Most of it was just being out with him and listening to him," Ed Wing said.

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Added Rena: ""It's more than financial support. There's a lot of hand-holding for these kids that RISE does."

RISE program is a springboard to college

Khamari Brown and Justin Denson have become standout football players after RISE helped them get into St. Raphael Academy and La Salle, respectively.

Denson will be leaving for Michigan State University in January to enroll for the spring semester and play football next fall. Brown, who is a senior at St. Ray's, was named to the All-State team as an offensive lineman.

"RISE … they always have my back," said Denson, whose father is serving a lengthy prison sentence. "Let's say I'm climbing a wall. If I ever tripped, Kaitlin and RISE were always there to keep me on my path, help me back up. Without that, it would be 10 times harder to do anything I've done."

Brown said: "It kind of makes me feel like I have another home, outside of school, outside of the football team. It gives me an opportunity to meet kids that were in a similar situation like me. I like how we can see how each of us grew throughout those situations and are able to understand each other."

Justin Denson attended La Salle Academy with help from a RISE scholarship and is enrolling at Michigan State University, where he will play football. *Kris Craig/The Providence Journal*

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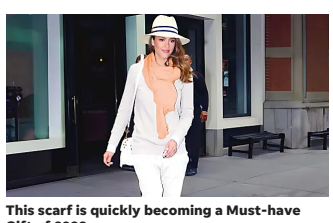
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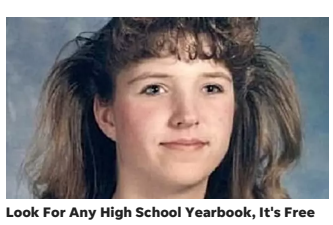
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