

## Mentors help pave the way for first-generation college-bound students

James Dorsey is the new president of College Success Foundation, one of the state's largest foundations that helps low-income students go to college.

By Chris Henry  
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**B**REMERTON — Kaley-Lynn Brocksome, wearing goofy “grad” glasses, high-fived students lining the hallway Thursday at West Hills STEM Academy.

The “senior walk,” in which members of Bremerton High School’s graduating class visit younger students around the district, is a treasured tradition.

Next year, Brocksome, 17, will be the first member of her family to go off to college. She’ll attend Washington State University for a major in elementary education. With six scholarships earned, plus grants, she’s got her first year of tuition covered.

What you don’t see, as she grins and waves to the cheering kids, is the hard work Brocksome put in and the hurdles she overcame to get here.

In Washington state, just 59 percent of high school graduates go on to pursue some form of post-secondary education, including trade school, although the difference in earning potential for those who complete college is well-documented.

In Bremerton School District, it’s 49 percent of graduates who pursue post-secondary education, according to the most recent data compiled by the state’s Education Research & Data Center.

Demographics likely factor into Bremerton’s lower rate, said Jeffrey Thayne, the ERDC’s data communications coordinator. Sixty percent of students here qualify as low-income under federal guidelines, meaning the deck is statistically stacked against them.

“Income levels are highly correlated with achievement,” Thayne said.

Students who are the first in their families to attend college face another layer of challenges completing college applications, applying for scholarships and obtaining financial aid.

Brocksome doesn’t quite qualify as first-generation college-bound, since her mom, Kathleen Bartel-Brocksome completed her bachelor’s degree online in 2016 — while working two jobs — as a single mom. But the family’s income and circumstances made Brocksome eligible for extra assistance in navigating the college application process through a partnership between the high school and the College Success Foundation.

The nonprofit foundation serves students who are the least likely to pursue post-secondary education, placing counselors dedicated to guiding and advising them in the schools. The Legislature in 2016 allocated funding to place College Success Foundation counselors at Bremerton and Port Angeles high schools, bringing the total number of schools served in Washington to 27.

“We want every student at all of our high schools, Bremerton and elsewhere, to feel like college is a real possibility for them, whether that is a short-term-welding certificate at Olympic College or a biology degree from the University of Washington. This funding is very specifically targeted at reaching that goal,” said Rep. Drew Hansen, D-Bainbridge Island, who chairs the House Higher Education Committee.

More than 80 students in grades 9-11 were recruited last year to the program, in which they receive one-on-one guidance, daily if needs be, on the logistics of getting into college and paying for their education. Brocksome is part of the first group of students to graduate since the program began.



*Bremerton High School graduating senior Kaley-Lynn Brocksome gets a hug from her mom, Kathleen, at the West Hills STEM Academy in Bremerton. Kaley-Lynn was inspired to get her degree after her mom got hers through an online program. (Photo: Larry Steagall / Kitsap Sun)*

“Oh my god, it’s helped me so much with literally everything,” Brocksome said. “I wouldn’t be in the position I am now if it wasn’t for this program. That sounds so cheesy, but it’s the truth.”

Brocksome’s grades weren’t the best at the start of high school. Then at the end of sophomore year, she watched her mom, a paraeducator at West Hills STEM Academy, graduate from the University of Washington with a bachelor’s in early childhood family studies. For Bartel-Brocksome, obtaining the degree through online courses was the fulfillment of a lifelong ambition.

“When she finally got her degree and got to walk, it was amazing,” Brocksome said. “I finally got to see all her hard work pay off.”

And it inspired Brocksome to follow her mother’s example.

Counselor Antoine McDaniel said part of his job is to help students dream big then show them the steps to achieve their dreams.

“It’s just to open up their eyes to the many opportunities outside Bremerton,” McDaniel said. “A lot of low-income students, this is all they know. They’ve never been outside of Bremerton. So we’re just trying to open up their eyes to the opportunities.”

Jenna Fitzgerald, 18, had no problem dreaming big. “I wanted to go into the medical field,” she said. “I was looking for something that would excite me.”

Fitzgerald had hoped to attend college in California. She found in-state colleges a more affordable option and applied with help from McDaniel, one of two College Success counselors at BHS. She’ll be studying bioengineering at Washington State University this fall.

Fitzgerald, the first in her family to attend college, works more than 20 hours a week at the Boat Shed restaurant, plays soccer, sings in the choir and is involved with ASB. She expects she’ll remain as busy at WSU. “I think I’m the kind of person who likes to be involved in everything,” she said.

According to the College Success Foundation, wealthy students are eight times more likely to graduate from college than low-income students. The foundation to date has worked with 9,500 students who have defied those odds. The graduation rate among students connected to a College Success mentor is 62 percent, approaching the 77 percent rate of high-income students.

BHS Principal Monica Sweet said that while there is no hard data yet on the program’s impact at Bremerton High School, she can say from observation it is working. The College Success counselors’ work



*Bremerton High School graduating senior Kaley-Lynn Brocksome gets high fives from students at the West Hills STEM Academy in Bremerton. Seniors visited various elementary schools. (Photo: Larry Steagall / Kitsap Sun)*

complements the district’s other programs to close the achievement gap for disadvantaged students, she said.

Hansen said he’s ready to seek funding to expand the program in future sessions should the foundation make that request.

“One of my core beliefs is every student everywhere in this state should be able to go to college if that’s right for them,” Hansen said. “Just seeing the track record of success this program has had really gives you confidence in making more investments along those lines.”