

THE 'VALLEY SCHOLARS EFFECT'

Believers join forces to create
a bright future for area youth

BY ROB TUCKER

Paloma Rodriguez, a rising sophomore at Harrisonburg High School, remembers being overjoyed when she learned she had been accepted into JMU's Valley Scholars program.

"I actually cried," she says. "I was so happy that I got accepted because then I knew I was going to college, when before I didn't think I could afford college. It was life changing."

Kristen Rhodenizer of Fort Defiance High School in nearby Augusta County credits Valley Scholars with providing her with security and confidence in her future.

"As long as I meet the requirements and commitments," she says, "I know that I can go to college and earn a college degree and be more stable in life. Having that stable future really motivates you to go through high school and do your work."

Students like Kristen and Paloma, who have potential but need support, benefit from the mentorship and academic enrichment that Valley Scholars provides, and can earn scholarships covering all tuition and fees if they persist with the program and qualify for admission to JMU.

Principals and guidance counselors from partner schools throughout the Shenandoah Valley are praising the program and talking about the "Valley Scholars Effect," in which students create excitement and curiosity at their schools because of their JMU connection.

"At Broadway High School, we have enjoyed seeing our students truly flourish in becoming confident, resilient and leaders among their peers," says principal Donna Abernathy ('91). "The unwavering support JMU provides to our students and families is exceptional. This program is life changing for our students who are blessed to be a part of the Madison Experience."

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime kind of opportunity for many of our students," adds David Baker ('06M), principal at J. Frank Hillyard Middle School in Rockingham County. "The level of

support, activities and enrichment that these students get is priceless, and it's going to pay off for generations to come."

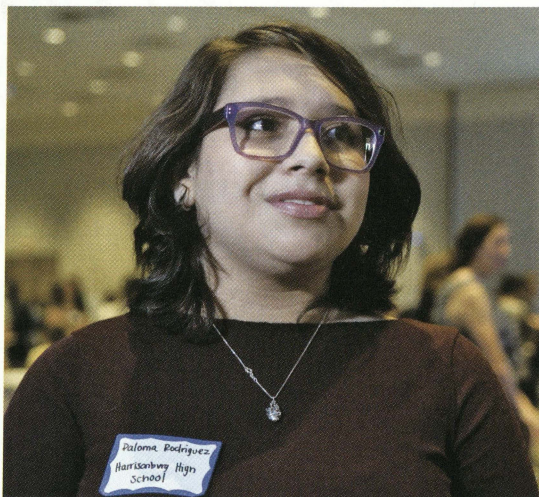
Valley Scholars has laid the foundation for success for more than 100 students in the region and enters its fourth year poised for growth. Plans are to increase the number of students entering the program and also to increase the number of schools that JMU partners with across the Valley.

To date, 104 of the 105 students who earned their way into the program remain engaged. The next cohort includes 44 students, a jump from three previous groups of

35 students. The overall GPA has risen with each incoming cohort.

Ninety-six percent of Valley Scholars students take honors, Advanced Placement or dual-enrollment classes. Three will start the highly competitive Governor's School this fall.

The success of Valley Scholars has captured the attention of *Virginia Business* magazine, which profiled the program in its May issue; the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, which awarded a



Paloma Rodriguez now knows college is within her reach.

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LOIS FORBES ('64), *Valley Scholars supporter*



VALLEY Scholars

(Above): Valley Scholars push themselves harder to prepare for college. (Left): Supporters like Leon and Bev ('68) Harris stand behind the power of education to change lives.

prestigious Rural Talent Initiative grant in June; and Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe.

"James Madison University's Valley Scholars program creates opportunities for high-achieving, low-income students to realize the dream of a college education," says McAuliffe, in response to the grant from the Cooke Foundation. "This new funding will help JMU welcome even more young scholars who are ready to learn and lead the way forward in the new Virginia economy."

Private support, like the Cooke Foundation's grant, is critical to the success and sustainability of the program.

"This investment represents a significant endorsement of the work we are doing," says JMU President Jonathan Alger, "to create a model for other regions facing the challenges of creating pathways of access and success for first-generation students."

Individual benefactors talk enthusiastically about creating opportunities for young people and stimulating return on investment.

Lois Forbes ('64) and her husband, Bruce, are longtime supporters of JMU, and have taken a keen interest in Valley Scholars. What piqued their interest?

"Bruce grew up in an orphanage," Lois Forbes explains, "and really the only way he could get out of the little town where he lived was to get a scholarship to a junior college playing basketball. So after we got established and had a little money, we thought about how we could help kids go to college who didn't really have the means."

"When we heard about Valley Scholars, it just seemed to be what we'd been looking for, for a long time."

"When you talk to the students," she says, "they want to be doctors, nurses, geologists, astronomers. I don't think anything is more

important than getting to be what you know in your heart you want to be. And I think that's what this program does for them."

Christine and Greg Parseghian, who have two sons who attend JMU, also believe in and support the Valley Scholars mission.

"When my grandparents came to this country, they didn't even know English, and they couldn't even think of an education at first," says Christine Parseghian. "It wasn't that they weren't intelligent; it was just that they had no resources, no money, not even the English language. They worked very hard in menial jobs and worked their way up to become productive members of society. So I feel like we need to give back."

"My background is in investment," says Greg Parseghian. "So I am always looking for low risk, high reward. We felt that Valley Scholars offered both because JMU is starting with the students early on in their high-school experience. They are preparing those students to have a very high probability of success, not just to get into college but also to be successful."

"I think that if you are blessed to have the opportunity to help people, the object is to change lives," he says. "And each of us has to find a way to do that. Valley Scholars spoke to us in that regard. It's a very cost-effective way to have a tremendous impact."

That impact will multiply with time as these young scholars progress along their journeys of learning and self discovery, and return to their communities as educated and engaged citizens, blazing trails, raising hope and paying forward.

The Parseghians talk about their investment in Valley Scholars in this issue's Be the Change profile (back cover).