

Houston senior who never thought he'd go to college gets full ride

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Jonathan Bush credits his boldness to dream big on Emerge, a Houston-based nonprofit that prepares high-achieving students from low-income communities for college. That's partly right.

But Bush is a wonder. A young man with hope in his eyes and a strong internal desire to be all he can be. He captivated a packed ballroom for Emerge's "Build the Village" luncheon early this year.

The 18-year-old senior at Victory Early College High School in Aldine Independent School District is graduating with both a high school diploma and an associate's degree from Lone Star College. He's heading to Northeastern University in Boston on a full scholarship this fall. He also holds a nearly 4.0 GPA and leads several student organizations, while maintaining a job at Whataburger working 30-40 hours a week.

Bush was recruited to join Emerge during his sophomore year. The organization, which was founded in 2010 at Chavez High School in Houston ISD with barely a dozen students, is now in five area school districts, 67 high schools with 3,100 students. Its college readiness program includes group college tours, SAT preparation, intensive writing workshops, academic advising and college support. Students also receive assistance in applying for college, including writing essays, securing financial support, and even support during their college years.

Victory Early College High School senior Jonathan Bush has been involved in the Emerge college program since 10th grade and graduated with a 3.98 GPA and an associate's degree from Lone Star College. (Elizabeth Conley/Staff photographer)

Bush looks like an all-American teen, the boy next door. But his fierce tenacity to learn comes from deep inside.

Bush was adopted as an infant by a loving couple whose "hearts were bigger than their bank account," he said during his speech. "I used to wonder about my biological mother ... sometimes I might imagine she might be Oprah ready to solve all of my problems."

His family moved often because of financial constraints, and that meant he changed schools frequently until high school. After meeting his biological mother as a child and seeing her dire living conditions, Bush said he was determined to excel in school to ensure he would have a better life.

At Victory Early College High School, Bush smiles with confidence. He's made it this far, but it hasn't been a simple path.

"I really have to focus on the 24 hours of each day to accomplish what I need to do," he said.

Most days, he would wake up at 5 a.m. to get to school by 7 a.m., do his homework at school, then leave at 2:30 p.m. to be at work by 3:30, where he would remain until nearly midnight.

"I do a lot of all-nighters, and protein shakes and granola bars go a long way," he said.

Though many students attend large state universities, Emerge's focus is often on smaller private colleges and universities and even Ivy League schools that can provide full scholarships and assistance.

"Emerge pushes kids to look beyond Texas to experience college life. It helped me to really take a chance on myself and believe that I could dream big," Bush said.

Only 14 percent of students from low-income communities in Houston are expected to earn post-secondary degrees or certificates, according to the Commit Partnership, a Dallas-based organization that helps build collaborative educational opportunities across school systems.

Dr. Antastasia Lindo Anderson, CEO of Emerge, knows personally what it means to have the opportunity to attend college for students like Bush. She attended and graduated from Washington University in St. Louis on a full scholarship, including housing, which "made college possible," she said.

Emerge has become so successful in preparing students for college that school districts in Texas and out of state have reached out to learn some of the organization's best practices, Anderson said.

"There are brilliant students in every community, but tiny barriers can be major roadblocks to these students," she said. "We work with many students who people assume will go on to college but they don't apply because they don't think they can get in. We are impacting students and reshaping how they are thinking about college. We call ourselves the village," she said.

Emerge's success is the numbers. Its students graduate at eight times the national average for students in their demographic.

Astrid Escobar, an early childhood initiatives analyst for Harris County who graduated from Wisdom High School, initially wanted to attend Brown University, an Ivy League school in Rhode Island, but believed her chance of getting in was so small she never finished the application.

Still, through Emerge, she earned a full scholarship to the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

"I never knew anyone who had gone to college," she said. "I had a good GPA, but I didn't think I could actually go to college. We couldn't afford it at all."

Emerge mentors helped her navigate the daunting first year of college, where she "didn't meet a lot of people there who looked like me, a Latinx from a humble background. It was a culture shock, but UVA grads who had been through Emerge helped push me through," she said.

They even bought her a parka for the cold Virginia winters.

That level of support is what so many students from underserved communities need to succeed in college. They deserve someone to show them the door to possibilities and let them confidently walk through it.

Bush is now helping to inspire other students, and he's ready for college life, though he's never stepped foot on the Northeastern University campus. He selected it based on a virtual tour.

"I want to travel and I want to experience everything," he said. "My first time out of Texas was our Emerge college tour to California. That made me realize there's so much more to see. It made me believe that I can do it, that I can go into a room with people who might think they are better than me because of my race or my background and not feel insecure. I'm prepared."

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