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Dreams Welcome in All Stars Project

Nonprofit gives youths skills and confidence to set and pursue goals

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By Holly Haber



Clara Oreno, an 18-year-old from West Dallas, credits the nonprofit group All Stars Project of Dallas with helping her become the first person in her family to graduate from high school and attend college. (Liesbeth Powers / Special Contributor)

Growing up in West Dallas was challenging for Clara Oreno.

“It seems like no one really dreams big in West Dallas, but I do,” the 18-year-old said. “I’m the first person in my family to graduate high school and the first to go to college.”

That might not have happened were it not for her three years with All Stars Project of Dallas. The nonprofit helped her build confidence and add skills by taking her to major companies for games and activities. The program focuses on developing interpersonal skills, such as making eye contact and learning how to handle awkward situations.

As the local branch of a national nonprofit based in New York, All Stars Project of Dallas offers programs to boost opportunities for inner-city youths ages 5 to 25. It emphasizes performance, broadly defined as everything from singing on stage to behaving professionally in business settings.

All Stars linked Oreno with a paid internship at Hunt Oil Co., and she continues to benefit from the All Stars Project via Development Coaching, a fairly new program that launched early in the pandemic to connect underserved young adults with advisers anywhere in the nation.

Her first coach, a risk consultant at consulting and accounting firm EY in Chicago, helped her get into college.

“As a first-generation college student, I had no idea what I was doing with applications and stuff like that,” Oreno said. “At first, I thought having a coach in another city was weird. But I really value getting to know people outside of Dallas much more than I thought I would.”

Her current coach, a partner in a Chicago law firm, has counseled her on areas of study.

“She helped me think through why I wanted to pursue criminal justice as a career and helped me find forensics as an area within criminal justice,” Oreno said.

All Stars Project of Dallas vice president Antoine Joyce, who grew up in Brooklyn’s Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood under conditions similar to Oreno’s, saw the need for an outreach program early in the pandemic.

While creating Zoom accounts and getting them online and all those things, you start to hear very rapidly that our young people were feeling isolated,” Joyce said. “We said, ‘How do we keep connecting our young people to the world?’



Clara Oreno studies criminal justice at the University of North Texas at Dallas. (Liesbeth Powers / Special Contributor)



EY partner Jay Fenlaw (left), who is on the board of All Stars Project of Dallas and serves as a coach for the organization, is joined at the All Stars Project office by Antoine Joyce, the nonprofit group's vice president. (Lawrence Jenkins / Special Contributor)

The organization launched Development Coaching nationally last year and has had 603 coaches — recruited from existing supporters — working with 604 clients ages 18 to 25.

All Stars Project of Dallas currently has 132 coaches and 179 “coachees,” Joyce said.

“It’s not just about how do you make it in this particular career or school,” he said. “It’s also about developing the types of relationships that don’t exist between poor youth and business professionals.”

The coaching program is intended to be a two-way street.

“Our adult partners will say they learned so much from young people — just as much as they learned from us,” Joyce said.

EY partner Jay Fenlaw, who is on the board of All Stars Project of Dallas and serves as a coach, said he learned he had to earn his coachees’ trust.

“I really need to make the other person feel that I am listening, that I am hearing and that I am asking questions that express my interest in them,” he said. “There’s nothing like being called upon to mentor, to coach, to lead that will motivate you to make yourself better.”

All Stars Project originated in 1981 in New York City, and Joyce discovered it in 1991 when he was 13.

He had been hip-hop dancing in an informal group started by his cousins, and they began performing in shows organized by All Stars Project.

“I grew up in the poor concrete jungles, the homes that Jay-Z raps about,” Joyce said. “I was interested in joining some gangs, but I didn’t because I was dancing in talent shows in Harlem and the Bronx.”



Antoine Joyce, vice president of the All Stars Project of Dallas, spoke at a February 2020 orientation event for participants in the group's Development School for Youth program. (All Stars Project)

Joyce began volunteering for the agency and joined the staff in 1997 as a talent show producer, which led to a job managing tours for DJ and rapper Grandmaster Flash in 2005. Joyce returned to All Stars Project three years later as a development officer.

He fostered a relationship with major supporter Hunter L. Hunt, and, when plans were laid for the Dallas office, Joyce asked to move south and lead it.

The group has flourished since it opened under Joyce’s guidance in 2013, growing its annual budget from \$200,000 to \$1.2 million and serving 2,000 people a year.

Everything moved online because of COVID-19, and Joyce hopes to resume in-person programs in the summer.

“We are all about giving young people in poverty experiences that they have never had before,” he said. “We help provide developmental experiences where people can see the world differently than what is presented through the narrower lens of poverty. These coaching relationships are part of that expansion.”

How to help

To learn more or volunteer, visit allstars.org.

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