To see how this played out as Kisanet got older, one only has to look at her decision to go to The Northwest School (NWS) in Seattle, an environment where she immediately felt a sense of community. A place where, in her words, “the mutual respect students have for each other, and between faculty and students, is special.”

During her four years there, in addition to a 3.92 GPA, Kisanet led the Black Student Union, sang in the a cappella choir, played volleyball all four years (captaining the squad in her senior season), and basketball for three years, and sang and danced in school musicals. All competitive activities for sure, but rather than being a zero sum game where there is a winner and a loser, the culture at NWS supported her desire to attain a level of excellence and “compete with myself instead of with other people. So, instead of trying to do better in a song or in a game than somebody else, I try to find a way to do better for myself – to set a personal goal to beat.”

Kisanet had a problem on her hands: she had been accepted to all eleven schools. Boston University, Carleton, Lake Forest, Macalester, Northeastern, St. Olaf, Trinity, UW, Vassar, Wesleyan and Whitman.

Which brings us back to that constellation of choices and how she made her choice. It was, again, the combination of attention to detail and looking for an experience that would help her grow that guided her decision.

After ranking the pros and cons of each, it came down to three college options – Vassar, Whitman and Wesleyan. All sterling choices, but the brightest in her eyes was Wesleyan.

For Kisanet, Wesleyan offered a chance to live in a very different part of the country, be challenged by strong academics and, most important, experience a university that “was very intentional in its commitment to diversity on campus.” A very good place indeed for a rising star to shine.
Over 1,000 people came together at the Seattle Sheraton on April 20th for lunch and inspiration. They were greeted by our high school seniors wearing college sweatshirts, ready to share their exciting news of multiple college acceptances. A dozen of our soon-to-be college grads networked with guests, proudly wearing royal blue graduation stoles representing the 40 who will earn their diplomas this year.

Seated throughout the Grand Ballroom were Rainier Scholars alumni. Graduates who are now finding their way in the world, in careers and in communities. As volunteers, as future board members, as engaged citizens. And as donors and supporters of Rainier Scholars.

The 10th Annual Rainier Scholars Luncheon, Pathways of Purpose, Lives of Leadership shined the light on scholars of all ages. We paid tribute to our students at a momentous point on their academic journey – graduation! Our high school seniors announced college acceptances to schools such as Emory, Pomona, Wesleyan and Seattle University. Our graduating college scholars, representing schools such as Columbia, Johns Hopkins, Middlebury and the University of Washington, shared their post-graduation plans and hopes for the future.

But as the lights dimmed and the video began, it was our Rainier Scholars alumni who stood in the spotlight. With wisdom well beyond their years, Karen Lobos and Abe Bui shared their personal stories of challenge and achievement, and plans to make an important impact in the world.

“In college I became more aware of my strengths and realized I could make a difference in direct service,” says Karen, 2014 graduate from Scripps College and now Student/Community Relations Manager at Rainier Prep. “I understand firsthand the significance that a community of support has on the lives of young people who have big hopes but need that extra guidance – that light along the road – to help them with their choices.”

“I think career and purpose go hand in hand,” says Abe, 2014 graduate from the University of Pennsylvania and Investment Banking Analyst for Cascadia Capital. In his work to help people navigate the sale of family owned businesses, he brings valuable insights. “For people who have built up their businesses from scratch, it is a very emotional transaction, and one of the biggest moments of their lives. Helping them through the process is one of the aspects I love most about my work.”

As Sarah Smith, Executive Director, so eloquently shared, “We desire to find meaning and purpose in our lives and spend our intellectual, emotional and creative energy in pursuit of those ideas… And in so doing, to be of service to others, to contribute to the uplift of all humanity.”

As alumni, Abe and Karen serve as shining examples of excellence. In the Rainier Scholars community they are beacons of light, helping others find their way. Our alumni help inspire students and families providing hope and illuminating future possibilities.

In a full circle moment Karen reflected, “It is really exciting to dream with my students about what their futures might be like.” When Karen looks ahead, her recent acceptance to graduate school at the UW Evans School of Public Policy means she will be the first in her family to earn a Master’s degree. “When I graduate I hope to be leading a life of service…doing whatever I can to affect change at a local level.”

Our Scholars, with their bold dreams, have something to teach us about purpose and leadership that connects with our hearts and shared human experience. Our luncheon guests and business community seemed to agree, responding with a record-setting fundraising total of $1.4 million dollars.

A luncheon of inspiration, leadership and light.
Ray Roberts: Making the Journey Real

By Tom Moore

Ray Roberts is hard to miss as he walks the halls of Rainier Scholars (RS). Down from his playing weight of 320 pounds when he played for the Seattle Seahawks, his 6' 6" frame still fills the door and overwhelms his desk space. At the same time, it is not hard to imagine him as a young Rainier Scholar. Such is the effect of his enthusiasm, intellect and boyish charm.

Then, when you hear his story, you realize he is, in fact, just like many other African American boys who have become Rainier Scholars. He was raised by parents who did not graduate from high school. His home was often chaotic, his neighborhood unsafe. His talents were discovered and allowed to shine by the grace of several caring adults in his community. He found his confidence in high school, attended college, excelled in an athletic career and earned a Master's Degree. He also realized he wanted to do more to give back, not just to athletes, but to his entire community and other kids just like him.

Joining the RS team recently as a part-time consultant, Ray brings a whole lifetime of experience to the role, including skills he learned on the football field and in the classroom, to help address a persistent challenge at Rainier Scholars – the ongoing recruitment and retention of multi-generational African American (MGAA) students. As part of the organization’s current strategic plan, Vision 2020, the MGAA initiative was developed to address the RS data showing disproportionately high attrition of MGAA scholars (as disaggregated from recent African immigrant students) in the 11-year program. This population continues to be one of the most underrepresented on college campuses, and success with MGAA students and families is critical to Rainier Scholars delivering on its mission.

“Our African American youth have the greatest number of barriers facing them on the path to college. We’re working to break down barriers...”

Ray Roberts

Ray’s journey to the heights of the National Football League and beyond might not have happened if it weren’t for the intervention of attentive adults around him. Individuals like his second grade teacher who would clean him up in the teacher’s lounge and give him a new T-shirt before school started; Ms. Dorsey in middle school who encouraged him and told him he was talented in math; Ms. Davidson in junior high who lent him emotional support he didn’t always find at home, and Ms. Sellers, his high school literature teacher who opened his eyes to the possibility of getting an athletic scholarship to college, showing him a pathway to break the cycles in his family.

Ray says, “These people invested in me and told me what was possible. They encouraged me to think about my future. And now I want to be that voice for kids who don’t think they have a choice.” As a mature, successful black man, Ray knows his voice can be influential and, as such, a significant aspect of his role is “to bring a personal and authentic touch to serving the African American community. To make the journey to college real.”

Ray and the staff at Rainier Scholars know there are no easy answers, but they are committed to taking on this challenge. At the same time, as the opportunity gap facing MGAA youth continues to grow, Ray believes there is a need to confront it directly. “Sometimes all the rhetoric gets in the way of the work. We need to let results inform more action. With this initiative, the WORK has to be the conversation.”

Career Highlights – Ray Roberts
• Asheville High School, 1987, Asheville, NC
• B.A., University of Virginia, 1992
• All-ACC Academic Team, 1990
• All-American, 1991
• Drafted 10th overall in the 1st round by the Seattle Seahawks, 1992; 9 years in the NFL
• Masters, Intercollegiate Athletic Leadership, University of Washington, 2007
Spring continues to be my favorite season here at Rainier Scholars. This is the time when scholars graduate from both high school and college, marking key milestones along the path of the Rainier Scholars journey, providing direct proof that the model works. Scholars, families and the greater community all benefit when the goals of college matriculation and graduation are met. And in this season of new beginnings, another generation of community leaders sets forth as the ultimate result of those achievements.

We are entering an extremely exciting year ahead at Rainier Scholars, as we lean fully into our goals, guided by our Vision 2020 strategic plan. Excellent progress was made over the past year on the plan’s core initiatives, but in the upcoming year, we will see the full outcomes of our One-Year Earlier Start Initiative as we begin serving students in the fifth grade. We will also dive deeper into the work of increasing our impact with African American students and families, in particular. These efforts, in conjunction with our focus on creating clearer career pathways and earlier exposure to STEM opportunities, inspire our team as we look ahead.

Our leadership team will have an excellent chance to focus on these strategic elements through our participation in the Leading for Impact (LFI) program, a professional development and impact strategy effort led by The Bridgespan Group, made possible by The Seattle Foundation and many leading philanthropists in the area. The LFI program will provide an opportunity for us to discern how we can “do more good” in the best way possible. While proud of our work in this community over the past 15 years, we continually strive to be more impactful throughout the greater Puget Sound region.

Before the fall kicks off and our LFI participation begins, I will have the opportunity to take a summer-long sabbatical during which I will travel through our country’s National Parks with my partner and two children. Our hope is to surround them with the vast and endless possibilities which exist in nature...just as our work here at Rainier Scholars continues to be one of inspiring a sense of possibility which exists within each of our scholars. Thank you for your continued support and a wonderful summer season to all!

Sarah Smith, Executive Director

Celebrating Key Milestones

Scholars, families and the greater community all benefit when the goals of college matriculation and graduation are met.

David Clarke

Our newest Trustee, David Clarke, was inspired by both the mission of Rainier Scholars and the work ethic and determination of our students. After attending a program tour to see the scholars and teachers in their element, his desire to be more involved grew.

What resonated with David most of all was the notion of leveling the academic playing field, providing educational opportunities to highly capable and motivated students of color who would not otherwise have access to them.

“Listening to the stories of these kids, the sacrifices they and their families make, the hard work and the pride they take in their accomplishments, is truly inspiring. These students are more than just scholars – they are developing the tools, lessons and values that will make them future leaders, role models and contributors to society. I’m looking forward to helping Rainier Scholars achieve its goals and make an impact over the long term.”

David is a partner at Perkins Coie LLP in Seattle where he serves as outside counsel and a key advisor for growth-oriented companies across a wide range of industries. David is active with a number of corporate and nonprofit boards, and lives in Seattle with his wife, Julia, and their two teenage daughters.

Sarah Smith, Executive Director
Come Visit Our Scholars!

We always welcome visitors to see our program firsthand. Tour the summer session where you will see our students in action and learn about their journey from classrooms to college to careers. July 6–August 10. To RSVP, call 206.407.2147 or email drobinson@rainierscholars.org so we can save you a seat!

Staff News

Karen Merz
Career Programs Manager

After years working in Human Resources at Microsoft, if Karen Merz learned one thing, it was how to “see people uniquely for who they are and then make a good match between their skills, strengths and their career goals.” Now, as the new Career Programs Manager at Rainier Scholars, instead of searching the globe to fill a position, she is working with scholars from around the country to help them find career direction that is the right fit for them.

Along with the rest of the College Support Team, Karen’s work begins in earnest once our scholars enter college. “Beginning freshman and sophomore years, we want to know where students are gravitating to in terms of career interests and the types of jobs that excite them.” What students may want is one thing, but preparing to compete for jobs in the marketplace is something completely different. To help, Karen is keen on working with students to build a foundation of networking, interviewing and resume-building skills. It is akin to building a strong brand. If students can differentiate themselves in their field of choice, they will succeed in securing internships, full-time jobs and career advancement in the years that follow.

In a word, Karen serves as a matchmaker. As she gets to know the students, she cultivates relationships with companies, mentors and affinity groups, and then facilitates the best placement into roles that align with the strengths of the students. For Karen, the ability to approach companies and offer a pipeline of diverse, highly-educated and talented young men and women is exciting. But the greatest thrill comes from providing our scholars with career choices that can change their lives.

Carlos J. Fernandez-Torres
Dean of Students, Academic Enrichment Phase

For a rising 6th grader just beginning their 11-year Rainier Scholars journey, it is important to be surrounded by adults who connect with them emotionally as well as intellectually. One of our newest staff members, Carlos Fernandez-Torres, brings a background that is culturally, linguistically and experientially tailored to his role as Dean of Students for the AEP.

The son of Mexican nationals who lived and worked around the world, Carlos grew up in diverse environments. Born in Lincoln, Nebraska, he was raised in Mexico, Niger and Ethiopia. After returning to Michigan for high school and college, a combination of the 2008 recession and his wanderlust took him back overseas with the Peace Corps to work with youth in Bangladesh, Cameroon and Panama. Over the next five years, Carlos built libraries, created gardens of rare and nutritious vegetables, taught English and started chess clubs.

When he returned to the States, Carlos worked in charter schools in Washington, D.C. before following his love of Seattle’s indie music scene to UW where he earned a Masters of Education Policy. In Rainier Scholars he found a home, an organization where his desire for diversity is nurtured. As he says, “Every day can be an international experience. Whenever we have a Mexican or Ethiopian family or student, I can easily talk with them about anything.” In return, his ability to connect with students builds trust and forms a sweet spot where “the kids can approach me when they have problems, but respect me as well.” Like one of his gardens in Cameroon, he is creating an environment that is nourishing and all too rare, a place where passion for empowering youth through education is cultivated, and thrives.
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