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227 new Avenue Scholars named

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Welcome to the family.

That was the message Wednesday for 227 high school students who were announced as the second group of Avenue Scholars. Now, the Avenue family has nearly 400 members.

Abraham Mora-Becerra told the new scholars that they all share a common goal graduating from college.

The Omaha Northwest senior will graduate from high school this month and then continue with the program at Metropolitan Community College, where he plans to study ecology.

“Live up your high school days, but do it right. Welcome to the family,” Mora-Becerra said.

The Bright Futures Foundation selects the Avenue students from six metro high schools based on recommendations from teachers and counselors and a Gallup survey that measures students’ motivation and resiliency.

The Avenue Scholars program, which began in late 2008, teaches students from low-income backgrounds what they need to know to get into college, succeed there and begin a career.

Most students in the program would be the first in their families to graduate from college. Some would be the first to graduate from high school.

Next fall will be the first year of the program at Millard South, Omaha Bryan and Omaha North high schools. It is continuing at Omaha Benson, Omaha Northwest and Ralston high schools. Some members of the first Avenue class have graduated from high school and are now students at Metro.

Ralston junior Melvin Ramirez said he didn’t take Avenue Scholars too seriously at his induction into the program last May. “I was texting under the table,” he said.

In the year since, Ramirez said, he has realized the opportunity he has been given. “Listen to what the people say. They did this for you because the future is yours. The future is ours.”

Like Ramirez, the newly selected students will see a “talent adviser” in class every day.

For the next several years, the advisers will be there to support the students as they work toward a high school diploma. They’ll teach them what it takes to get into college or trade school from entrance tests to scholarships. The advisers also will support them once they get to college and help them land a first job in their chosen career field.

The program and its curriculum were designed by the Bright Futures Foundation, led by former Westside Superintendent Ken Bird.

So far, the program has seen success. Among the seniors currently participating, all 74 will graduate from high school within four years, and all have plans to continue their education.

Among them is Sherae’ Sawyer of Omaha Benson. She plans to attend the University of Nebraska-Lincoln next fall, with hopes of becoming a film producer. Sawyer welcomed the new students by sharing an original poem, slam style.

“I manifest greatness. ... There’s something untapped in my mind. ... The path is the actual obstacle. ... The struggles are just to test me.”

Her rapid, rhythmic delivery brought a standing ovation from students in the room.

Mora-Becerra shared the advice he received from his talent adviser at Northwest, Yano Jones: “‘Closed mouths don’t get fed.’ So, I talk to him all the time. ... He’s a friend who you’ll see every day at school.”

He’s family.

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