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CLASS ACTION

Homeless in high school, Jessica Boyle fought to make Colby a place where students from all backgrounds can thrive

By Ruth Jacobs



The week after commencement, Jessica Boyle '12 crashed at a friend's place as she prepared to leave Colby for her Teach for America assignment. But that was nothing new for her. In high school Boyle spent countless nights at friends' homes—and not because they wanted to stay up late talking or watching TV. Boyle was homeless.

But those days weren't at the top of her mind as Boyle packed her bags to start anew. Instead she was focused on a program she started to provide school supplies to low-income first-generation Colby students. She wanted to ensure that her initiatives—which have led to a heightened awareness about how the Colby experience is different for students from higher need backgrounds—would remain after she moved on.

“That's what I think her real gift to the College has been,” said Trustee Richard Uchida '79. “She's turned her disadvantage into what we hope will be an advantage for folks who attend the College in the future.”

Boyle did it through will, determination, and a deep belief in fairness. She did it because she wasn't satisfied with just making things better for herself. She did it because she was willing to tell her story.

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Boyle's home life in Bangor, Maine, included drama and instability. With her father out of the picture, she lived with her mother, who struggled financially and medically.

In high school Boyle buried herself in academics and activities. French club. Volunteering. Yearbook. "In doing whatever I could to stay away from home, I actually was able to finally gain some significant extracurricular leadership activities," she said.

But Boyle, a dean's list sociology major at Colby who studied income inequality, now sees how her circumstances may have helped propel her to success. "In some ways I was lucky that I had such a bad situation," she said. "I've done a lot of work on this and [studied] how people from low-income or impoverished or abusive backgrounds become successful. ... They feel alienated from the place they're born into, so they have no choice but to carve out their own space somewhere else. And I was extremely alienated from the place that I was born into. ... I was taking comfort in school."

She was spending so much time at Bangor High School, in fact, that her yearbook advisor wondered about her home life. He brought in the school social worker, who determined that going home was not an option, she said. Ultimately they set her up with a shared apartment, and she had a stable environment for the first time.

"The qualities I have that got me to Colby are the qualities that also made me inappropriate at Colby." —*Jessica Boyle '12*

But with no guidance from family about the college process, and no hope that she could afford to attend, Boyle thought she'd most likely keep working at McDonald's after high school despite her academic success. "I believed in my heart and mind and soul that I belonged in college, because I knew I was very intelligent and driven. But everyone was telling me no, no, no, no, no.



PHOTO BY ARNE NORRIS

Boyle sorts through supplies left behind by Colby students with Kara Constine '13 (left), who will take over some parts of Boyle's program for low-income first-generation college students.

... All the signs were pointing to no, but I was saying yes. I was saying I should be in college—but I didn't know how, or what to do, or who to talk to, or where to go."

Enter Cary James. Boyle's chemistry teacher saw a bright student with potential who could use a helping hand but wasn't looking for a handout. "She was a tough nut to crack," he said. James paid for Boyle to take the SAT, persuaded her to consider Colby, and arranged for her Colby inter-

wouldn't pay anything."

He was right. But Boyle's first major victory introduced a whole new battle.

Academically, Boyle felt prepared for Colby. But she did not anticipate the cultural and social differences she would encounter. From her first days on Mayflower Hill, she felt different. When discussing why they chose Colby, for example, her peers would say they wanted to be in Maine, or they wanted to be at a liberal arts school. "I would say, 'They gave me the best financial aid scholarship.'

"I was very, very misunderstood. People just didn't know what to do with me." Beyond what she said, her blunt, honest approach took people by surprise. "They didn't understand that when you live in a trailer park," she said with a laugh, "you have a different idea of how to act than when you live in a nice house in the suburbs in a wealthy town."

Other things made Boyle feel that Colby wasn't the place for her. When the dorms closed for winter break, Boyle had nowhere to go. She asked to be allowed to stay on campus but met with resistance. "I don't like you telling me there's something wrong

view with an alum in Bangor. "I convinced her she was getting in. I said 'I'll eat that chair if you don't get in. There's no way you don't get in that school,'" he recalled, laughing.

But Boyle wasn't concerned about being admitted. She was concerned about the cost. Guidance came, again, from James: "I pretty much guaranteed her that she

with me. Okay, I don't have anywhere to go for breaks. Why are you telling me that it's my responsibility to figure it out? I applied to Colby as a homeless student—you need to be able to accommodate me.”

Boyle's advising dean, Assistant Vice President Barbara Moore, remembers those early conversations. “Academically she's amazing. She was clearly a high performer, a Mitchell Scholar—she really did well academically. So that really wasn't her struggle,” Moore said. “It was really the social adjustment.” While Boyle was working her way through health insurance paperwork, trying to make car payments and buy books, her peers were shopping online for fun, Moore said. “Those were difficult moments for her.”

“That was her stress. It wasn't like ‘I have to do my finals,’” said Moore. “It's ‘Where am I going to go in between the [semester]

ending and Jan Plan starting?’”

Despite Boyle's efforts to navigate bureaucracy and make Colby work for her, she just couldn't break the feeling that something was terribly wrong. “I was like

teered at a middle school and recharged. She bought a pair of running shoes and started exercising for the first time in her life. “That was the first time I had ever created for myself an outlet—a physical outlet. I'd never

“Of all the students I've met over the years of serving as a trustee, I will say that she has inspired me the most.” —Richard Uchida '79

... there's no way that my college experience is supposed to be like this,” she said. “My circumstances are too extreme.” She decided to drop out.

Moore urged her to take a leave of absence and consider returning. Boyle volun-

owned a pair of running shoes before. I made that investment myself,” she said.

Paul Butler '93, Boyle's middle-school English teacher and principal of the primary school where she volunteered, remembers a conversation with Boyle about



PHOTO BY ARNE NORRIS

Boyle's school supply program began out of frustration at seeing binders being thrown away when some students struggled to afford them.

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the challenges of adapting to Colby—challenges he too faced as a student from a lower-income family from Bangor. “I tried to just give her some comfort that I was there too,” he said from his office at Bangor High School, where he is now principal. “She wasn’t wallowing. She just needed some time, it seemed, to reenergize and figure out if she was going to have an impact.”

By the fall Boyle was ready to resume her mission to earn a degree and make the Colby experience better—not just for herself but for students like her.

Colby may not enroll many students with stories as extreme as Boyle’s, but it does enroll a significant number of first-generation college students—11 to 14 percent of each class, according to the Admissions Office. Some of those first-generation students need support, as do some students who aren’t first in their family to go to college.

As a result of getting to know Boyle, Director of Student Financial Services Cindy Wells ’83—once a first-generation student herself—is working to identify these students earlier and make sure someone is checking in with them, especially during that critical first semester. “Probably

could still be doing more. I think since Jess, we’ve been much more thoughtful about it and proactive about it.”

And that is just the beginning of Boyle’s impact.

Boyle’s personal struggles led her to a systematic confrontation of inequality at Colby. Her frustration at seeing used school supplies, in good condition, thrown into the trash inspired her to establish the school supply closet for low-income first-generation students. At the end of the school year, when students discard belongings ranging from fans to futons to be resold at the R.E.S.C.U.E. (Recycle Everything—Save Colby’s Usable Excess) sale in the fall, Boyle pulls out the school supplies, organizes them, and puts them in storage. Students in need request supplies and receive packages in their mailboxes. Tashia Bradley, director of the Pugh Center, is helping to institutionalize this and other initiatives of Boyle’s. “You might not think fifteen, twenty dollars makes a difference, but it’s twenty dollars they could have for something else,” said Bradley.

shut on me by previous administrators.”

Efforts to avoid singling out students who don’t want to be identified as first-generation or low-income have resulted in what some see as a culture of silence. “It’s a hush-hush kind of thing around here I’ve noticed,” said Bradley, who arrived in the fall of 2011. “I think that it puts the students at a disadvantage.”

With Bradley’s support Boyle was able to organize a first-generation dinner at orientation 2011. About 25 students from all four years attended, creating an opportunity for Boyle and others to share tips on “how to get by.” These include avoiding book purchases by using interlibrary loan, how to borrow rather than buy a scientific calculator (another program Boyle championed), and who to go to at Colby for various needs and requests—things Boyle had to figure out on her own.

But the informal network was equally important to Boyle. “These freshmen are coming in, many of them with very little idea of what it means to be in college, and ... they’re meeting successful upperclassmen—they’re meeting upperclassmen on SGA [Student Government Association] who are the first in their family to go to college, upperclassmen who are CAs [Community Advisors] ... on sports teams, Writers’ Center tutors,” she said. “They’re seeing us around campus, and then after the dinner they know that they have these little places on campus where they’re going to find someone who’s the first in their family to go to college. So that was a big part of it.”

The group met twice more in 2011-12, and this year Bradley plans to increase the number of gatherings to monthly, at minimum. Future meetings will include faculty and staff who identify as the first generation in their families to attend college—yet another way to increase the dialogue and work to eliminate any disadvantage that may come with not having a family member to call on for help navigating the world of higher education.

These programs—along with an alternative spring break service trip to New York City that Boyle initiated and led—are part

“For some people, especially first-generation college students or low-income students, coming to Colby is nothing short of a miracle. ... Just because of the price tag you don’t think that you would ever have a chance to come here.” — Jessica Boyle ’12

because of Jess,” she said, “I’m going to be more apt to reach out to advising deans and say, ‘All okay with this one?’”

For its part, the Dean of Students Office now works with the Admissions Office to identify students who may need extra support, according to Moore. “We have a lot of students who do struggle with the transition, and I think socioeconomic stuff on campus is there, it’s real,” she said. “We

This fall, in Boyle’s absence, Bradley and her student workers in the Pugh Center will manage the school supply closet.

The Pugh Center will also be the home for another of Boyle’s initiatives: a first-generation networking group. “With the arrival of Dr. Bradley at the Pugh Center,” said Boyle, “the door has really been opened to do stuff for first-generation college students whereas, before, the door had been



It took some time, but Boyle, fourth from left above, developed a strong community of friends and advocates at Colby. At left, she celebrates her graduation with Director of Student Financial Services Cindy Wells '83, who helped Boyle navigate the bureaucracy at Colby.

of her legacy. While she found allies in some areas, she met with resistance in others, and Boyle left Colby with unfinished business. That's where Uchida, a New Hampshire attorney and vice chair of the Board of Trustees, comes in.

Boyle reached out to Uchida, chair of the board's Educational Policy Committee, and later they met to discuss economic inequality at Colby. She shared her story and her struggles, as she had done with so many others at Colby. "I left both inspired by that meeting but also determined to make sure that her efforts don't fall by the wayside now that she's left the College. We cannot afford to let that happen," he said.

Among the priorities, he said, is making textbooks available on reserve in the library—which Boyle tried unsuccessfully to do before talking with Uchida. "It's going to take more than a disgruntled student

to change whoever's mind it is that is in control of this," she said. "But I'm coming from the bottom up. Mr. Uchida is coming from the top down, so hopefully something will come of it."

And with that, it was time for Boyle to move on.

As a sociology major, Boyle brought her perspective to course work and research, devoting herself to understanding the relationships between socioeconomic class and education. "It wasn't just about her experience and how to understand it, but how to make this path work for other academically gifted students who came from poor families," said her professor and mentor Assistant Professor of Sociology Victoria Mayer.

Now Boyle will take all this with her as she begins her Teach for America assignment. Wells, who helped Boyle through many challenges at Colby, sees how Boyle's experience will allow her to help

others yet again. "As I said to her, you will never forget where you came from. And you will encounter somebody who's in your situation and you will be able to add value to their life that none of us could add. You will have something on your palette of colors that you will say 'Been there, done that. Let me show you how to maneuver this.'"

Uchida sees another benefit. "I think she's going to be able to say to people, 'You know, there are schools like Colby that are available to you. If you work hard you can get there and you can stay there and you should take advantage of those opportunities. They are not schools that ought to be or should be or will be out of reach to you.'"

But it won't end there for Boyle. She hopes to attend graduate school, which Mayer thinks would be good for Boyle and for the field. "She's able to take complex ideas and express them in a very accessible way, which is not easy," Mayer said. "I think she could be a strong spokesperson for directing how education can be more supportive for low-income students."

It took her five years and a lot of angst, but Boyle leaves Colby prepared in ways she would not have anticipated. "I'm glad I went here, because I think it's putting me in a more powerful position in the world," she said. "I've had a chance to really gain an understanding of how to be successful." And now, she says, "I'm not coming into life at the same disadvantage I that I came to college with."

What once seemed so far from reach was finally in hand. "She did it," said Wells. "Damn it, she did it." 📍

CONTACT JESSICA BOYLE '12

Jessica Boyle would like to hear from alumni who are interested in visiting her middle-school classroom in Enfield, North Carolina, providing advice or resources. She can be contacted at jesscboyle@gmail.com