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PIONEERS

Colby's first Posse leaves changed by Colby—
and Mayflower Hill remains changed by Posse I

BY GERRY BOYLE '78

Months of training, poring over literature and Web pages, and an overnight campus visit didn't fully prepare Posse Scholar George Williams '06 for the world of Colby College.

"It wasn't New York City anymore," said Williams, who is the son of Jamaican immigrants and was class president at a vocational high school. "I wasn't in the Bronx. No one spoke Ebonics. ... When I went to classes, I really felt intimidated because my voice wasn't a Colby voice."

But he wasn't alone.

Williams arrived on Mayflower Hill in the fall of 2002 with nine other members of Colby's first "Posse," a group of students chosen by the College with the assistance of the New York-based Posse Foundation. In May he and five other members of the group graduated; three others in the group who took time off along the way expect to graduate next year. Together they were Colby's Posse I, described by Associate Professor Margaret McFadden (American studies) as "actual, real pioneers."

"Though they all approached it [Colby] in very different ways, collectively I think they really did make a difference in the College," said McFadden, who advised several of the students with independent majors and honors theses. "And they made it a better place for those who will come behind them who are also members of underrepresented groups."

While many members of underrepresented

groups have attended Colby, the decision to contract with Posse New York in 2001 was a new and different attempt to bring more diversity to the Colby community. The national Posse program helps 26 (as of June) affiliated universities and colleges to recruit students from public high schools in the country's biggest cities.

Selected from hundreds of candidates, all successful Posse scholars receive full scholarships that are based neither on race nor on financial need. Coming from public high schools in New York City, many of which have large minority and immigrant populations, the Posse scholars include many ALANA (African-American, Latino-Latina, Asian-American, or Native American) students. Coming from the Bronx, Brooklyn, and other New York boroughs, the students also are thoroughly urban—and probably unfamiliar with the culture of colleges like Colby, Middlebury, and Bowdoin, all of which have been or are part of the Posse network.

Anticipating culture shock, the program puts students in posses, small groups that train together for months before they head off together to college. The idea is to provide a ready-made support network—and to make it more likely that the students will succeed.

"I know I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Posse," said Chelsea Downs '06, a Staten Islander and daughter of a teacher and a social worker.

The program's place at Colby has become more apparent with each passing year—and the arrival of each new Posse. Twelve students are expected to arrive this fall as members of Posse IV. And, as of this writing, a possible second agreement between Colby and Posse New York was being negotiated, according to administrators. Meanwhile, the Posse pioneers say their successors have found and will find the Mayflower Hill trail already blazed.

As Posse I member Jia Chen '06 put it, "We survived. They can, too."

Members of the pioneering Posse at Colby did more than survive. Overcoming obstacles that even their pre-Colby Posse preparation could not level, they have achieved in different ways. The group includes well-known campus activists, musicians, a spoken-word poet, and organizers of forums on challenging topics of race and difference.

Some of their achievements were personal; others, challenging the status quo or simply contributing to community initiatives, had a campus-wide impact and will leave a permanent legacy.

"They brought a new perspective," McFadden said. "They are not afraid. They were willing to say what they thought, and they often thought quite differently from other students in the class. And that was always productive."

But not always easy.

Both the achievements and tribulations of the first Posse at Colby are best appreciated if one first understands how far and fast many of the students have come.

Some, like Chen, are children of immigrants, first-generation college students breaking new ground, both at Colby and within their New York communities and families. Some (Williams, Downs, and Chen included) are students of color, living for the first time on a predominantly white college campus in a rural, predominantly white state. Some had to adjust to an academic setting for which they felt inadequately prepared by cash-strapped New York City schools.

One Posse student saw her first science lab at Colby. Some went to schools that didn't develop writing skills. "It doesn't mean they're less able," said Joe Atkins, a faculty member in psychology who also serves as coordina-



George Williams '06 and his mother, Morine Brown, of Bronx, N.Y., share a joyful moment at a reception for graduating members of the first Colby Posse at Lunder House Commencement weekend.

tor of multicultural programs and support and as mentor to the Posse scholars when they are first-years and sophomores. "It just means that [some] are less prepared."

And that they had lots of ground to make up in a short time.

Case in point: Chen, a cheerful presence on campus, grew up in southern China, moving to New York's Chinatown with her parents when she was 13. "In middle school [in New York] I didn't learn a word of English," Chen said. "A hundred percent of my classmates were Chinese."

Chen went on to Manhattan International High School, where again all of the students were immigrants—but from all over the world. English was the only common language and Chen soon added it to her repertoire.

She excelled in high school but, because she didn't feel she could afford to attend a good college, considered bypassing college altogether to follow in the path of self-educated Chinese entrepreneurs she'd read about and admired. A counselor persuaded

her to continue her education and Chen was selected for Colby's first Posse. She quickly expanded her range of interests and skills.

Soaking up knowledge, Chen developed an independent major in administrative science with an emphasis on marketing, accounting, and corporate finance. That was accompanied by enthusiastic excursions into computer science, classical music and guitar, and Japanese. "And then my English professor Cedric Bryant, he really inspired me," Chen said. "He's a great writer and a great professor. I said, 'Oh, my god. I just want to be like him.'"

Her post-graduation plan: to take LSATs in the fall with the intent of going to law school in California.

The first Posse is replete with students who grew and blossomed while at Colby. Several were leaders in organizations centering on multicultural issues. Williams, an independent major in science, technology, and communications, was active in campus efforts to join Colby with the Waterville community. Zen Glasser '07J spent a year in France and

On preceding page are Chen, Chelsea Downs '06, George Williams '06, Antonio Mendez '06, Claire Jimenez '06, and Jairus Steed '06. Three other members of Posse I expect to receive their degrees in January.

coupled her French major with a minor in Jewish studies. Claire Jimenez '06 and Shapel Mallard '07 explored the world of “spoken word,” a growing genre of performance poetry.

Posse students worked with the Bridge and Project Ally, promoting awareness of gay and lesbian issues. They were among the organizers of a statewide diversity conference that drew students from Bates, Bowdoin, and beyond.

Their interests are far ranging, leading them to scatter into the Colby community and form what Chen called “our own little Posses.”

“We are all very much individuals,” Williams said. “We’re not very group oriented.”

That would seem to contradict the intent of Posse—that the pre-formed, small, tight group provides support to get everyone through the rough spots in the transition from home to college and integration into a new community. “They’re not a warm and fuzzy group,” Russell Langsam, director of Posse New York, said of Colby’s Posse I. “They didn’t provide a lot of satisfaction to Posse staff in terms of our investment in them as a group. I think working with them individually was a different story.”

But Posse I members say they were there for each other when needed. And there were those times.

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*Margaret McFadden,
Associate Professor of
American Studies*

For some of the students it was simply the adjustment to Maine, to Waterville, to living without buses and subways. “Just being frustrated that I couldn’t have things delivered,” said Downs, smiling at the recollection. “I couldn’t get anywhere, snow was everywhere. Everything was very inconvenient. It was petty things like that.”

But there were more serious and fundamental adjustments to be made.

Along with adjustment to college life was a fitful start due to unexpected turnover of Colby’s Posse mentors—staff members assigned to work with the group on campus as required by the Posse agreement. The first mentor, hired by Colby for the Posse role, left the College after one year. A succession of mentors followed, some successful, some not. That upheaval stabilized somewhat with the hiring of Sammie Robinson, associate dean of students for multicultural affairs, and Atkins, though by that point Posse I members were beyond the two years of Posse-required group meetings and had decided they no longer wanted formal mentoring.

“Colby, while not always agreeing on what steps we should take next, has always engaged in that conversation and I really respect that,” said Langsam, at Posse New York. “I’ve had some experiences with other campuses where there is more of a denial about things not working so well.

“To me it feels like a respectful two-way relationship and I think that’s really important for Posse to be successful. It’s a relationship and it really needs love and care from all sides.”

Apart from the staffing issues, there was the simple day-to-day experience of students adjusting to a new minority role.

Jia Chen '06 (second from left), a member of Colby's first Posse, gives family members a tour of campus during Commencement weekend.



Posse students, usually with a resigned shrug, say they explained repeatedly to other students that Posse isn't a scholarship based on financial need or race. One student recalled being confused with another member of her Posse, whom she does not resemble except that they are both women and students of color. And beyond the specific slights and misunderstandings was the feeling that some initially had that they simply didn't fit in—that in and out of class their views were out of the Colby mainstream.

But for the most part, they hung in. "They're fighters," said McFadden. "They had to be fighters to get here."

She recounted an incident three years ago in one of her classes that began when with discussion of chalkings and banners done in connection with Race Awareness Week, including a sign that said, "You only got in because you're white."

The sign was intended as a satiric turn on a comment that students of color said they had heard. But it angered at least one student, sparking an impromptu and intense in-class discussion of race and difference that Posse students led—and McFadden let ride.

The difficult discussion led to new awareness among the students. And a white student who admitted he had no idea why students of color were angry, but was willing to listen, engaged others in the discussion. He ultimately was invited to the Posse Plus retreat, an annual off-campus weekend run by Posse for scholars and their friends. McFadden, who also took part in the retreat, said the student was so moved by the experience that he and others around him were left in tears. "What had happened to him in the course of that weekend was very powerful," she said. "And I think that happened a lot in classrooms."

Tracy Hamler Carrick, assistant professor of English and director of the Writers' Center, saw members of Posse I use the center's services—and later become effective peer tutors there. Carrick said the Posse students broke new ground for students of all backgrounds. "They made it okay to talk about what they didn't know and what they needed to learn," she said.

Carrick and McFadden credit Posse students with being willing to have difficult

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conversations with others on campus, so that it has become acceptable to articulate concerns and conflicting views that had existed but had not been examined. Those conversations, which sometimes bumped planned lessons, often were intense and emotionally charged but ultimately resulted in new awareness among students and faculty. "This kind of change is painful and it's hard," McFadden said. "They have really changed the place by creating that space."

And how much has the climate for those discussions changed in four years?

"I think on an individual basis, kids talking to other kids, being roommates with other kids, there has been progress," said Jairus Steed '06, an African-American Posse I scholar. "And not being shy about talking about difference, or just about asserting where I'm from and what I think is right about the world. They've had a tremendous effect."

But he feels that effectively addressing the larger social issues on campus will require more of an institutional and cultural commitment from Colby.

"[Students] are here for four years," Steed said. "There's only so much you can contribute. It's the professors and administrators who are here for the long haul. ... To what extent is the school really dedicated to promoting diversity?"

"We talk about these issues in class and we throw these ideas around but is there the sense that this really matters? That these sorts of cross-cultural communication skills are the only thing that will save the world in this new century? ... Do we tell kids from day one, since you're part of this community you have a responsibility to do X, Y, Z? You need to be an ally. If someone makes a sexist remark or an anti-Semitic remark, as a member of this community we're expecting you to be an ally, to say something about it. Not that everyone has to be this big revolutionary, but there is actually some personal responsibility."

As Steed challenged Colby to make awareness of diversity and difference a more fundamental part of the College's culture, the administration was moving in that direction. "We need to keep raising the bar in what we're doing making the climate on campus open and tolerant and understanding," said President William D. Adams.

Adams said plans were underway to expand the initiatives and programs of the Pugh Center, which houses more than a dozen student organizations that promote intercultural understanding. He said the fact that 19 percent of the incoming Class of 2010 are ALANA students (almost double the percentage of previous years) underscores the need to broaden the reach and influence of Pugh Center programs. Adams said he and others continue to ponder ways for the Colby community to encourage vigorous intellectual debate while discouraging discussions that lead to "instances of public insensitivity" that have lingering and hurtful effects.

In the meantime the relationship between Posse and Colby has had positive results, administrators, faculty, and students agree. The College, Steed said, is "doing what their goal is to do, which is expanding the pool from which colleges like Colby recruit their students. How many kids in my Posse would have been overlooked by Colby's normal recruitment process? Or may not have measured up in one way or another to criteria but have succeeded here in amazing ways and have contributed to the school in so many ways? By being student leaders on campus, we created a different sort of dynamic that's more inclu-



Colby Posse scholars pose for a group portrait at a reception for the graduating members of Posse I in May. From left, standing, Jairus Steed '06, Antonio Mendez '06, Victoria Yuan '07, Angie Polanco '08, Chelsea Downs '06, William Fong '08, Rebecca Travis '07, Jeronimo Maradiaga '09, Jia Chen '06. Kneeling, from left, Dan Lin '07, and George Williams '06.

sive for everybody—not just Posse kids.”

Posse scholars, in turn, have grown in many ways. Steed, a classical violinist, explored American music through an independent major combining music, history, and American studies. Downs worked with Hardy Girls/Healthy Women, an organization in Waterville that works to empower girls, and entered an internship with Nestlé Waters in Manhattan. Antonio Mendez '06, a student leader on campus and supportive mentor to younger Posse students, was bound for Newark, N.J., to take a position with Teach for America.

Williams had heard of neither of Colby nor Posse when his guidance counselor sent him to that fated interview five years ago. In the last four years he worked with seven different student organizations, including the South End Coalition, where he mentored disadvantaged teenagers in Waterville. He paraphrased his South End conversations like this:

“Dude, what are you doing? You want to be a roughneck? I’ll tell you what a roughneck is. I’m from the Bronx, New York—you can’t tell me about being bad. I know what bad is, buddy, and this ain’t it. So don’t tell me that you can’t do something because of the environment and your situation. That’s garbage.”

Between finals and job interviews with a pharmaceutical company, Williams sat down to talk about Posse. And toward the end of the interview he paused and said, “Let me tell you a story.”

Williams recounted the propitious process that propelled him to Colby.

He remembered calling on his experience as a high school wrestler to psych himself up for sessions with Posse and Colby interview-

ers. In one interview he bared his soul, telling the panel, “You *need* to give this to me because I’m not going to stop until I get it.” When President Adams shook his hand and wished him luck, Williams hung on tight. “I’m not going to let go of your hand until you give me this scholarship,” he recalled thinking at the time. “This is mine.

“I was trying to tell them, you can take a chance on any of these kids here, but you take a chance with this kid, he’s going to be the most voracious, he’s going to take this place on.”

They did, and he did. And he ended up contributing to the community and learning some things about himself at the same time.

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For more on the Posse program, go online to:
www.colby.edu/mag/posse03
www.posse.org