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What the *Posse* program is and what it isn't

The **WORD** On Colby's Posse



By Gerry Boyle '78

Mid-afternoon on a Tuesday in July in an office seven floors above the hustle of Wall Street, a group of high school seniors is kicking back. They're from all over New York—Brooklyn, Harlem, Chelsea, Chinatown—and are as varied as the crowds on a Manhattan sidewalk. One has been in the U.S. only three years; some have been in America their entire lives. One works in a Chinatown insurance office; another in a Park Avenue investment firm. They made their way to Wall Street by ferry, train and bus, pulled up chairs and within minutes were bantering like old friends.

About their visit to Colby in April, in a small plane that took off in a rainstorm. ("At least it wasn't snow. You'd see ten Posse kids parachuting back.")

About how cold it will be in Maine. ("Wear clothes. It's not like they haven't invented the jacket.")

About the short-lived escape of Pedro, the pet pig owned by Colby President William Adams. ("Who did he think he was, Free Willie?")

The jokes and comments flow with an easy familiarity, as if the students are jamming musicians who have played together for a long time. "We're more than just friendly," said Rebecca Travis '07. "We have friendships."

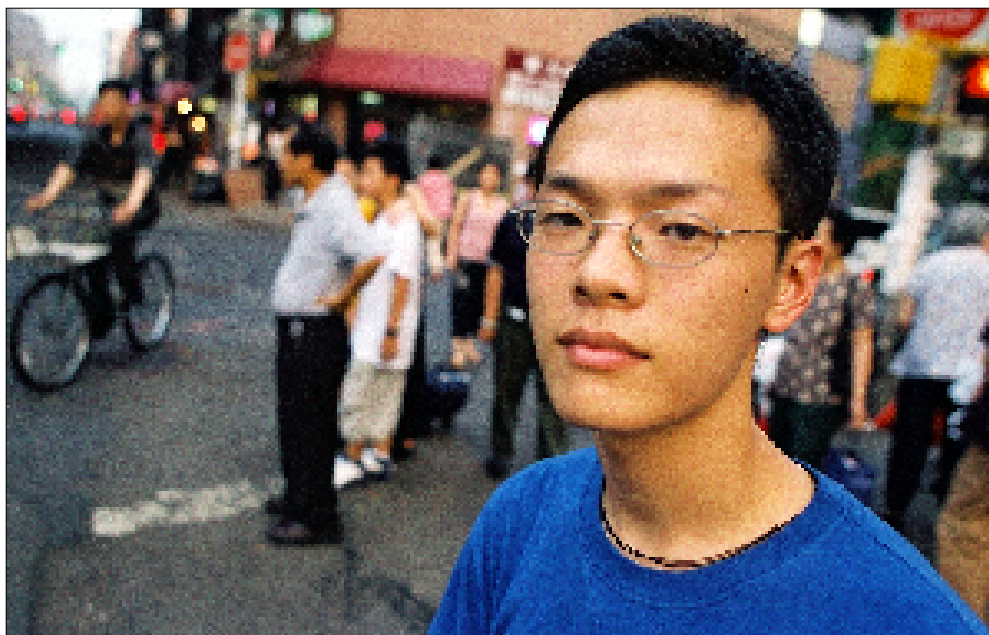
This is “Posse 2,” the name given the second group of 10 students to enter Colby through the Posse Foundation, an urban-based program that recruits and prepares city students for careers at affiliated colleges. Colby is in its second year with Posse; Bowdoin and Middlebury, among others, have been involved with Posse for several years.

Posse was founded 14 years ago by Deborah Bial, a Middlebury graduate, with the goal of recruiting students with extraordinary academic and leadership ability who might not take part in the traditional college selection process—and might not consider colleges beyond their cities. Colleges interested in building a diverse and accomplished student body contract with the Posse Foundation to do the recruiting—and much of the selection—in any of the four cities where Posse operates: Boston, New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. Posse will open in Washington, D.C., in 2004.

Affiliated schools include Colby, Bowdoin, Middlebury, Grinnell, Carleton, Hamilton, Bryn Mawr, Trinity and nine other colleges and universities. All of the Posse partner schools give full tuition scholarships to all enrolled Posse students; in Colby’s case additional aid for room and board, if any, is awarded according to financial need. Schools also pay an annual fee to help offset the foundation’s operating costs, though the vast majority of its revenue (and its Wall Street office space) is donated by philanthropic organizations and corporations.

Students are recruited and selected from urban public schools by Posse, with the colleges assisting in the final selection of each school’s 10-student “posse.” Students are provided with mentoring and training aimed at helping them succeed, both before and after graduation.

The colleges and Posse Scholars benefit, said Parker Beverage, Colby dean of admissions. “It gave us a little bit more outreach into areas where we’re not known and we’d like to be known. And I think the Posse kids gain an opportunity that they might not have been exposed to. Chances are that a place like Colby or Bowdoin or Middlebury might not have been in the constellation of schools they would have been thinking about.”



Dan Lin '07 on a street corner in Chinatown in New York City. Lin spent the summer working in Chinatown. When this photo was taken, he had just left work and, days before leaving for Colby, was “trying to store some memorable images of the place I had lived for years.”

Or as Sarah Burke, a trainer with Colby’s second Posse group, put it: “We run through our schools real quick and the only ones that send off any signals at all are Brandeis, sometimes, and occasionally they know Vanderbilt, because of the sports. They’re just not on their radar.”

That changes very quickly.

Consider Dan Lin '07, who arrived in New York City with his father three years ago from China (his mother had arrived in New York earlier). A slight young man with an earnest, direct manner, he enrolled in Manhattan Comprehensive Night and Day High School on the Lower East Side. The school has about 800 students—80 percent immigrants, representing more than 30 countries.

Lin and other Posse Scholars, as they are called by the program, are asked to choose three schools among the colleges affiliated with their respective Posse programs—in Lin’s case, the nine colleges that are part of Posse New York. Though he’d never heard of Colby, Lin hit the Web sites and college guides and came away impressed. “Colby’s rank is very high,” he said, “one of the best.”

Jia Chen '06, a member of “Colby Posse 1” and the oldest daughter in a family that came to the U.S. from China in 1997, queried co-workers and supervisors at the branch of the

New York Public Library where she worked in high school. They were “very positive” about Colby, and Chen made her choice. She’s now a sophomore majoring in economics—the first person in her family to go to college.

But already readers trying to craft a definition for Posse may be forming stereotypes—and they just don’t mirror reality.

Colby’s Posse Scholars include a gifted musician whose older siblings went to Williams and Swarthmore. There is a daughter of a veterinarian and a young man who wants to support his mother, a single parent who is ill and unable to work. They include a first-year student who already has studied at Oxford and captained his football team, and another who, if she hadn’t been accepted to Colby Posse, was going to apply to St. Louis University—in Madrid. One student was the YMCA Teen Volunteer of the Year for New York State, selected from 170,000 nominees. Another traveled with a friend to India to make a documentary on child prostitution—when they were 16.

“There are so many misconceptions about the [Posse] Foundation,” said Posse New York’s Ramon Castillo, who worked with the second Colby group weekly for eight months prior to their arrival in Waterville. “That Posse is a minority scholarship or Posse is

a need-based scholarship. . . . Some high schools, just by thinking that, cause us to miss out on great students. They think if you're a great student but you're white, you won't be able to get into the Posse program."

And Posse members are aware that their college communities may have little knowledge of what Posse is and how it works.

"People can't really understand it," said Jairus Steed '06, a member of Colby's first Posse and a graduate of New York's specialized and prestigious LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts. "It's not a race scholarship. So there's white kids in Posse. It's not a financial scholarship. There's rich kids in Posse. You never have to hand in something financial."

York City's public schools. Initially, those students may have little else in common—except that they have achieved academically and emerged as student leaders. According to Jimenez, that is the crux of the Posse message that hasn't gotten out. "I know a lot of the other kids [in Posse] really cared about emphasizing the fact that Posse is a merit scholarship and a leadership scholarship," she said.

Each one of these students is a scholar, says Sandra Sohne, Posse 2 mentor at Colby. "They have earned the privilege to be here by virtue of the hard work they've done in high school, both in and out of the classroom."

Or as Zen Glasser '06, a Colby Posse 1 member, put it: "We don't want a pity party

ships by teachers, guidance counselors and leaders of civic organizations.

The whittling process involved three rounds of interviews, including a daylong activity session where students were watched carefully by Posse personnel, alumni and selected volunteers. "We're looking for leaders," said Russell Langsam, director of Posse New York. "But we define leaders in many different ways."

Leaders may be dynamic and persuasive. They may be particularly effective listeners, bringing a group together to accomplish a goal. They may be noticed for being able to encourage reticent students to take part in activities. They may be able to incorporate a variety of ideas into a discussion. All have

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(This created a thorny issue for Colby, which does not award merit aid. "Ideally, the students would qualify financially for the full tuition scholarship," said Beverage in Admissions, "and perhaps they would qualify for additional financial aid, which of course we would give them because our policy is to meet the full financial need of any student we enroll.")

But if Posse is a race-blind and need-blind program, other students are not blind to the fact that many Posse students are African American, Latin American or Asian American. This ethnic and racial mix merely mirrors the demographics of New York City. But it also has buttressed misconceptions, especially at colleges like Colby, where Posse is new. "I really don't think a lot of kids knew what it was. Or that it was there," said Claire Jimenez '06. "It's a touchy subject because you think of Posse and lots of kids misunderstand what it is. They think of affirmative action and they think affirmative action is a scam. And then other words start to pop up. . . . I feel like a lot of it is that they misunderstand what diversity is."

In this case, diversity is a Colby student body that now includes more kids from New

and we want people to know we well-earned our places at Colby."

The Posse Scholars who enrolled at Colby this year and last were winners in a marathon selection process that began nearly 18 months before they came to Mayflower Hill. More than 1,800 New York City high school juniors were nominated for Posse Scholar-

stood out in the collage of students in their respective high schools. "Just in the first ten minutes, I started to realize [Dan Lin] is different," said Melody Chan, a counselor at Manhattan Comprehensive. "When he speaks, he speaks with confidence. And eye contact, communication skills—compared to other immigrant students, you could



Zen Glasser '06 listens during a lecture by Associate Professor of American Studies Margaret McFadden. Glasser, a Posse scholar, says the Posse Program is often misunderstood.

just tell. He's something."

Not all of the counselors and teachers know exactly what Posse is looking for, but the Posse staff does.

It culls the 1,800 nominees to a group of about 700. Over a period of weeks, those students go through another round of interviews and activities before some 200 are selected as finalists for the approximately 90 slots among the nine Posse New York affiliated colleges. Only then are the students asked to give their preferences. Posse assigns them to the college to which it thinks they are most suited (final-

ists often don't get their first choice), and 20 or so students are brought in for a final session. Only half will make the final cut.

They learned of each other's career hopes, family expectations and even spiritual needs. "We all have our strengths and weaknesses," said Roy Wilson '07, a Harlem resident who intends to enter the Colby-Dartmouth engineering program. "Some are the same; some are different. With the meetings you get to see who is who."

And what they have in common: "We're all a bunch of jokesters," said Montana Vasquez '07, an aspiring writer from Manhattan.

Not that Posse doesn't take college and Colby seriously. Training not only prepares Posse members to relate to each other but also to relate to people from other cultural backgrounds. It also prepares them to adapt to life in a college community in a small New England town. "Being away from home, just not having noise outside your window," said Castillo, the Posse 2 trainer and a Posse graduate of Depauw University in Indiana. "Little things."

Things like COOT, the kickoff Colby Outdoor Orientation Trips for first-year

ists often don't get their first choice), and 20 or so students are brought in for a final session. Only half will make the final cut.

"Why are you here? Immediately not only do I have to defend myself but I have to defend the Posse program," said Zen Glasser '06.

"People kept on asking us, 'What are you? Who are you?' We were, like, 'You know what? We need some press.'"

That final session is an interview with Posse staff and administrators from the assigned college. In Colby's case, the panel in New York has included Beverage, President Adams, Dean of Students Janice Kassman and Sohne. Posse 1 member Steed said the assembled 20 finalists are very much aware that there is no second prize. "You know ten

students. "Camping?" said Glasser, who grew up in the Canarsie section of Brooklyn and was a standout in her 1,000-strong class at Edward R. Murrow High School. "We don't go camping. I've never been camping. What is that? It's a totally different life."

When you're away from home and family for the first time, for any student those differences add up.

"Homesickness?" said Chen, the Posse 1 member from Chelsea in lower Manhattan. "Oh, my god. I don't want to talk about it. I cried for so many nights. So I called [my parents] at the beginning of the first semester. And I just can't help it. My tears just fall down. I had to hang up. And then get ready, call again. Hang up. . . . Why am I crying? I'm not sad. I just missed them so, so much."

Homesickness is just one of the potential pitfalls that Posse training is designed to head off. At a session in a spare conference room at the Posse offices in July, Castillo and Ramon Marmolejos, the Posse New York career program coordinator, led activities that probed the Colby Posse members' feelings about the relative importance of family, about their definition of success and prestige. Some students said they hoped to support their parents financially someday; some said they wanted careers that would contribute to a community.

The self-examination had two purposes: to start students thinking about the academic



Victoria Caicedo '07 working with kids at the Long Island City YMCA of Greater New York. Caicedo's dedication to children was recognized when she was named Volunteer of the Year and Teen of the Year for the New York YMCAs.

track that could lead them toward career goals and to encourage self-examination that will allow them to better know themselves as they head into a new environment. Marmolejos, 25, a New Yorker of Dominican descent who left a fast-track marketing job at Pepsi to work for Posse, later said he knew what some students would be feeling. As a freshman at the University of Pennsylvania, and the first person in his family to go to college, he felt like an outsider when he arrived on campus. “You ask yourself, then who am I?”

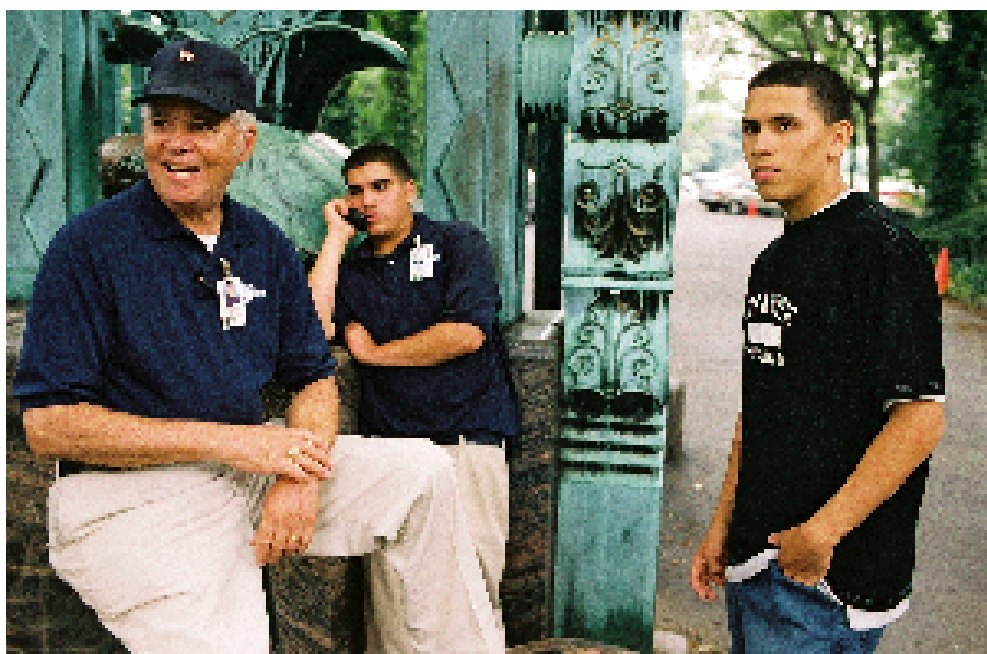
Or you grow weary of explaining, said Glasser, who, as the only white student in Colby Posse 1, found herself explaining the program to other students over and over. “‘Why are you here?’ Immediately not only do I have to defend myself but I have to defend the Posse program.”

Glasser said she and other Posse 1 members came to Mayflower Hill not wanting to be singled out but soon changed their minds. “People kept on asking us, ‘What are you? Who are you?’ . . . We were, like, ‘You know what? We need some press.’”

Beverage and other Colby administrators hope misunderstandings about Posse will be just “bumps in the road” and that ultimately Colby’s Posse experience will be similar to that of Bowdoin and Middlebury. “Their experiences have been pretty good,” Beverage said. “The kids have come, they’ve persisted, done their work, made contributions to the campus community. They’ve held leadership positions and helped to generally raise the consciousness of the community.” Six members of Posse 1 made the Dean’s List first semester last year; four made it second semester.

This success doesn’t happen accidentally. The program requires Posse members to meet as a group every week for the first two years with a mentor provided by their college (in Colby’s case, Sohne and Lisa Sweet, both from the Dean of Students Office). Posse members also take part in a Posse Plus retreat in February to which they invite friends, assembling a group that may include students, faculty, staff and administrators.

The Posse Foundation is concerned that scholars’ leadership on campus doesn’t



Jeronimo Maradiaga '07, right, is shown with co-workers at the Fordham Road Gate of the Bronx Zoo. Maradiaga, who is from the Bronx, worked at the zoo last summer before coming to Colby.

always lead to leadership roles after graduation. Posse is in the process of aggressively expanding its career program, one that already includes close relationships—and internship and job opportunities—with major corporations like Lehman Brothers and Bloomberg, the media conglomerate.

Posse administrators take pride in the performance of Posse students in the workplace and point to steadily expanding opportunities, both in the private sector and in nonprofits.

“My job is easy,” said Laura Brief, national director of Posse’s career programs. “We just have to get the door open a little bit and then the students go in, and they do so well that they break it wide open and are really pioneers for the rest of the students to come.”

At Colby, administrators hope that the Posse students will be pioneers on Mayflower Hill as well. “Over time we hope that those students who come here as members of the Posses would get the word back to younger siblings, to counselors in their high schools,” Beverage said.

In at least one case, that already has happened. When Susie Liu '07, a member of Posse 2, arrived on campus she was reunited with her best friend from Manhattan International High School, Jia Chen '06. “That was part of the reason she chose Colby,”

Chen said. “My friends in high school, when they applied for the Posse scholarship, they were, like, ‘Which one should I choose?’ I said, ‘Choose Colby. Choose Colby.’”

In this way, students from Posse are adding to the breadth of their own experience, noted Castillo, the Posse trainer who graduated from Depauw. “What I got out of it was being able to see the world in a totally different way,” he said. “New York is very diverse and it’s very active and alive, but it’s also a little bubble. This is a way to see what the rest of the country is like.”

It’s also a way to add different perspectives to the mélange of the student body on Mayflower Hill, as Colby looks to broaden the academic and social experience it offers. But could it be dismissed as window dressing, a quick fix for a college bent on diversifying its student body?

“Oh, not at all,” said Steed, the Posse 1 member from Harlem. “And when you look at the financial commitment that the schools that come to Posse make—there are easier ways to display that you are friendly in that sort of diversifying way than to get into a program like Posse. So even a school that takes that first step shows that they really care.

“It’s certainly a humungous step in the right direction.”