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DOORS PUSHED OPEN

FOR DEVIN GIBBS, COLLEGE SEEMED LIKE A LONGSHOT—UNTIL IT WASN'T

BY KARDELEN KOLDAS '15

Before enrolling, Devin Gibbs '14 received an invitation from Colby. The letter offered to bring him to campus and provide accommodations so he could get a feel for the school. What it didn't say was he had, in essence, been admitted.

Gibbs, who lived in Waterville just minutes from campus, thought the letter was a scam. "I had never gotten anything for free before," he said.



TO BE HONEST, I HAD THE TOOLS FOR COLLEGE BUT I HAD NO IDEA HOW TO GO ABOUT GETTING INTO COLLEGE OR APPLYING.”

—Devin Gibbs '14

He still hasn't. But through hard work, he's taken advantage of every opportunity that has come his way. And he dreams of

making the same opportunities real for students in the future.

Gibbs almost missed his own opportunity. A month after he disregarded the invitation from Colby, his guidance counselor received a call from Admissions asking why Gibbs hadn't attended the campus event, or even responded. In fact, Gibbs, who applied to Colby only because it was in his hometown, had been admitted with a generous financial aid package.

“It was actually through my guidance counselor freaking out that I understood, ‘Oh wow, Colby’s actually a big deal,’” he said.

That moment was the beginning of a remarkable journey that, with mentors pointing the way, has led Gibbs in a few short years to the prestigious Molecular Biology Interdepartmental Doctoral Program at UCLA. “I went from poor Waterville to Colby and now interacting with some of the most famous scientists in the world,” he said.

Growing up in Waterville, he and his younger brother were raised by their mother, who worked long hours as a waitress and tried to make ends meet. When she couldn't, it meant eviction notices and bouncing from apartment to apartment. By fourth grade, they moved into public housing, making things a little easier, he said.

In a stable home, and with his mother's unflagging support, Gibbs finally began pursuing his own interests—and his true versatility surfaced. He excelled in his classes, played football and did track, and played saxophone in the high school jazz band.

Then came time for college. “To be honest, I had the tools for college but I had no idea how to go about getting into college or applying,” he said. In the end, he applied to schools he had only heard of—and to Colby because it was in his hometown.

The challenges had just begun.

At Colby, the first hurdle was picking classes, and Education Professor Mark Tappan, Gibbs's academic advisor, explained how college classes worked. He later took one of Tappan's classes and did an independent study of societal pressures on underprivileged boys to under-succeed. “It really put a lot of things into perspective for me and the world in general,” Gibbs said. To this day, those ideas have stayed with him.

But rather than study education, Gibbs pursued a music major and planned to take all the available pre-med courses.

Music led him to Eric Thomas, director of jazz and wind ensembles. “If Mark was a turning point, Eric was a huge factor in my life for sure,” said Gibbs. “I didn't have any real Black role models.”

For Gibbs, Colby was a different world, and when he needed help navigating, he turned to Thomas. Soon he met Thomas's family, including his wife, the J. Warren Merrill Associate Professor of Biology Andrea Tilden. In time, Tilden would describe Gibbs as in the top one or two percent of science students she's taught in her career.

Sophomore year Gibbs settled in, joining the football team and spending time with the Thomas-Tilden family. Over winter break, he took care of Tilden's lab in the Olin Science Center. Tilden noticed Gibbs's interest in science and biology and suggested he take her neurobiology class. “I just gave him a little jump-start,” she said.

With that nudge, Gibbs shined. He became Tilden's research assistant and debuted in the science world.

“What I saw in him was someone who was going to become a very talented research scientist, very early on when he first started working in my lab,” said Tilden. Starting then, Tilden and Gibbs worked together year round, including summers. He became a biology and music double major.

His later years at Colby were filled with music, research, and football. With graduation ahead, Tilden suggested he apply for a research assistant position at Boston Children's Hospital to work with Dr. Louis Kunkel, who discovered the biggest gene in the human genome.

As Kunkel's research assistant, Gibbs studied Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy—a severe genetic disease that causes muscles to break down over time. As they searched for a cure, Gibbs was promoted to lead research assistant, coauthored seven papers, and attended international conferences.

As Gibbs continues to make remarkable achievements at the graduate level, he hasn't forgotten his path. He knows he wants to be in a place where he can have an impact, especially on young people.

He wants to be someone's Mark Tappan, Eric Thomas, or Andrea Tilden. “I would love,” Gibbs said, “to be a professor.”