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Scholarships Help Communities as Much as Students

[The Call](#) / Tina Downey



I always planned to go to college, and I've always been committed to helping my Kansas City community. After some detours and bumps on my road, I am finally closing in on my bachelor's degree at the age of 41, and I am so eager to use it to do more for my community. I am ready.

I am not a typical college student. I am 41, with three children and three grandchildren. High school is pretty far in my rearview mirror, and the road from there to where I am now has had some detours and bumps. But with scholarship help and

more from the KC Scholars Scholarship Program by Great Jobs KC, my community and my family are looking forward to a smoother path.

My high school was Lincoln College Preparatory Academy, a wonderful and prestigious school. I had to test well to get into it and had to keep my grades at a high level to stay there. My goal all along was to get into college, and I even had a full scholarship to go to Clark Atlanta University.

But then I got pregnant, and I didn't think that the school would help people like me. I thought I had to put everything on hold and take care of my child.

I found work in accounting and project management and planned to go back to school when my kids were older, but then I hit another detour – debilitating seizures caused by epilepsy. Never mind college, I had to stop working and go on disability until I could get the seizures under control. At the time, 18 years ago, I was going to Penn Valley Community College.

When the seizures calmed down, I took up volunteering. I became the outreach director at my church, in charge of about 150 volunteers. I wrote grants for the nondenominational City of Truth Church in Kansas City.

Fast forward to recently, my health was under control, I was working part-time, and my oldest child was about to graduate from high school. Great Jobs KC had a table at an event, and they told me about the adult learning program. Still, I didn't jump on it right away. I was worried that because of my age and where I was in my life that it wouldn't work out. I didn't want to experience disappointment again. Still, I took the leap, and I'm glad I did – because I won a scholarship.



That moment was a blessing in my life. The scholarship has helped me afford things I never would have been able to with my finances – like text books, for example. I went back to Penn Valley Community College and then transferred to the University of Missouri Kansas City. I'm now working on a double major in communications and business/ nonprofit management. When I graduate in a little over a year, I'll have doors open that would have previously been slammed in my face.

I see myself finding work in community engagement with bigger corporations. I work with many partners now at my church – schools, police, shelters and more. I hope that being able to bridge the gap between the major corporations and the groups they service will help us all. I know I'll be able to plug them into the people in the community. My degree will be the key to unlocking that.

I am already giving the testimony of my experience in my community. Black scholars like me – 1,789 of us – have been awarded almost \$90 million from the KC Scholars Program. In this demographic, there are a lot of people who might be the first person in their family to go to college. The program just awarded 267 scholarships for students to go to Missouri State University.

Down the road, I hope the connections I have now throughout my community and the ones I hope to make in the business world will allow me to amplify what I do and help guide corporate support to the unseen, less visible nonprofits in the area that still do great work.

And I hope to run my own nonprofit at some point. I want to help battered women and homeless people. I would love to set up a nonprofit that provides all the resources these people need in one place. I've been in those situations myself. I was struggling to figure out what my children and I would eat. I know how it is to go from place to place to get help.

Great Jobs KC is a model for the nonprofit I hope to create one day. Plenty of scholarship programs exist, but Great Jobs KC does more than drop some money in your lap. With them, you have someone who walks with you through the process, and even after it. They connect you to jobs. I have someone to talk to about my plans and goals. It's a great support system for me. That's what sets them apart.

That is crucial to those of us without college experience. By necessity, we just know how to work hard and make money. We don't know about college culture. We need mentors, which Great Jobs KC provides. They know the real problems we have in the inner city. We're not making enough money to actually live. Rent is high. Food costs are high. They walk with us on the road to financial stability, both as individuals and as a community.

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Tina Downey, a scholarship recipient from the KC Scholars Scholarship Program by Great Jobs KC, is currently a student at the University of Missouri Kansas City.