

NAVIGATORS of dreams and goals

Catholic Charities' Education Navigation program guides, aids, and supports college students to reach success

By Mary Lou Seewoester

Makenzie Fox was used to jumping hurdles for the Decatur High School track team and as a North Central Texas College (NCTC) athlete. But she discovered that the hurdles in life can be more challenging than the 300-meter events she easily won in high school.

When she changed her course of study to radiology, she had to work full time to pay for school because she no longer had an athletic scholarship. Her living situation became unstable, and the hurdles to finishing school grew higher.

"A year ago, I was just hopping around, staying wherever I could stay. ... I was basically living out of my car," she recalled.

A full-time job and 32 hours of clinical practice at Medical City Decatur gave her a 60- to 70-hour workweek, which left little time for sleep or study. If she found time to study, then she also had to find Wi-Fi — either at a coffee shop or at work after her shift. And the car she drove 50 miles from Decatur to NCTC in Gainesville needed new brakes and, later, new tires.

On her own since 19, the now 22-year-old was running out of money and

motivation when she found Education Navigation, a Catholic Charities Fort Worth program that helps low-income college students overcome nonacademic barriers to succeeding in school. The program requires coaching twice a month with an on-campus client navigator to help students set and achieve short- and long-term goals as well as improve budgeting, time management, and study skills.

Fox said when she first met with Client Navigator Lisa Wilke last fall, "she sat me down, and we made lists of my goals and what I really needed to focus on."

Strategic financial assistance allowed Fox to reduce her work hours and focus on studying. Then, coaching with Wilke and quarterly skills workshops helped her improve time management and budgeting. Fox said at first, she was "skeptical" about mentoring, "but it ended up helping me so much more than I thought it would."

"There were so many times I wanted to just drop out," Fox recalled. "But that wasn't an option, and Lisa made sure it was not an option for me."

Today, Fox has stable housing with a family member, has made the NCTC Chancellor's List with a 4.0 GPA, and will graduate this semester with an associate of applied science in radiologic technology.

Education Navigation combines strategic financial assistance with long-term coaching and mentoring to support students academically, financially, and emotionally so they can overcome obstacles to completing college. The program began in 2015 with one navigator at NCTC in Graham. Today it operates at eight community colleges and three four-year universities. Last year, 121 Education Navigation students graduated, and this year, more than 100 students are expected to graduate.

One of those students is Kristopher Spraggins, who recently accepted a position as a registered nurse at UNC Health Wayne in Goldsboro, North Carolina. But two years ago, as an Associate Degree Nursing (ADN) student at Vernon College in Wichita Falls, his future was uncertain, and his stress was high.

"My bank account was drained dry," Spraggins said. "I literally didn't know how I was going to pay for nursing school."

He said he woke up every morning worrying about how to pay his bills because his part-time job as an emergency department tech at United Regional Hospital in Wichita Falls didn't cover his full-time load of college classes.

That changed when he met Melody



◀ Kristopher Spraggins stands before the emergency department at the United Regional Hospital in Wichita Falls where he worked part time as an ER nurse tech. (NTC/Juan Guajardo)



◀ Makenzie Fox poses in front of the health science center at North Central Texas College in Gainesville on March 25. (NTC/Thomas Otto)

Sanchez, his Education Navigation client navigator. Along with financial assistance, Sanchez provided coaching in financial planning and in dealing with stress.

“I could actually focus on school, instead of focusing on the finances for school,” Spraggins said. “And Melody was always there to listen and help any time I needed to vent. She helped me talk through it and then would say, ‘Let’s look on the bright side. What can we do to help you be better prepared next time?’”

Spraggins explained that ADN courses are so strenuous that his cohort of 42 students was down to 20 by the final semester. But the skills and tools he acquired through

Education Navigation made him resilient.

“They helped me realize I can overcome more than I ever thought I could,” he added. “Melody genuinely helped me become a better person ... I wish there were a million of her.”

Khanezia Hill can also attest to the rigors of nursing school. An excellent student in high school and in previous college classes, the study demands of ADN classes at NCTC surprised and overwhelmed her.

Additionally, the single mother of a pre-schooler commutes 60 miles from her home in Bonham to NCTC and 65 miles to Medical City in Lewisville for clinical practice.

“Balancing my time was a big concern,” Hill said.

Like Fox and Spraggins, she found support with Education Navigation, which first helped with the cost of books. Then, with Wilke, her navigator, Hill learned to balance her time as well as her budget, and she overcame being overwhelmed with the amount of work and study needed for academic success. Wilke also guided her in applying for NCTC scholarships, grants, and student loans.

“Lisa helps me navigate anything and everything and helps me figure out my next steps,” she said. “She’s always there saying, ‘What can I do to help? Let’s try to figure this out.’”

Hill expects to graduate this semester and is ready to embrace her future as a registered nurse. 🇹🇽

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