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Jill Biden finds inspiration in students

Wife of vice president speaks of perseverance at nonprofit's luncheon

By *JENNIFER PRICE*
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As a community college professor, second lady Jill Biden has seen firsthand the power of education.

Many of her English students, she said, seemed to have "the odds stacked against them" -- women in abusive relationships, parents struggling to provide for their families and young adults battling addictions.

"Many confront obstacles that seem insurmountable. And yet, they make their way to class, they keep writing, and time and time again, they work hard and persevere through major challenges," Biden said. "Every day in my classes I see the power of education to break down barriers and to open students' eyes to the possibilities around them."

Biden was the keynote speaker Friday at the first alumni recognition luncheon for Delaware Futures, a Wilmington-based nonprofit that helps at-risk high school students get to college.

Denise Tolliver, executive director of Delaware Futures, said the organization, whose mission is to provide academic, social and motivational support as well as cultural enrichment, recruits students who may be underachieving in middle school. Up until this year, the program accepted 16 incoming high school freshman each year, but thanks to a \$12,500 grant from Ronald McDonald House Charities, the group now welcomes 25 new students a year.

Before teaching English at Delaware Technical & Community College for 15 years, Biden taught for 13 years in Delaware public schools as a reading specialist and English teacher. She also worked part-time at the Rockford Psychiatric Hospital Adolescent Program.

After husband Joe Biden was elected vice president, she moved to Washington and now teaches English at Northern Virginia Community College.

"People often ask me why I choose to continue teaching. The answer is really quite simple -- it's the students," she said. "I can honestly say that they are my heroes, and I am profoundly moved by their determination to learn and make a better life for themselves and their families."

Students enrolled in Delaware Futures participate in study groups, tutoring, adventure-based learning camps, leadership workshops, community service projects, mentoring sessions and internships. A key benefit of the program is the guarantee of partial or free college tuition for all program graduates who meet admission requirements. Twelve partner universities across the country offer scholarships to qualifying students.

Of the 131 students who have gone through the program since 1993, 125 have gone on to college and the remaining six entered the military.

Three alumni were honored for their successes Friday at the Hotel du Pont in Wilmington.

Ronika Money, 29, graduated cum laude from Delaware State University in 2002 with a bachelor's degree in psychology. In 2004, she earned a masters of arts in higher education from Indiana University of Pennsylvania and now works as the coordinator for student services and involvement at Penn State University-Brandywine.

Amir Garcia, 22, will graduate from DelTech with a degree in radiologic technology in December and transfer to Arcadia College near Philadelphia to become a physician's assistant. As one of few black students at the Charter School of Wilmington, Garcia said he often felt like an outsider.

"But I had Delaware Futures behind me," he said. "Those counselors taught me to hustle, to work hard. Now in everything I do, I put forth great effort, knowing I'll gain a great return."

Also honored was Bruce Taylor, 23, who graduated from Sewanee, The University of the South in 2007 with a major in ecology and biodiversity and a minor in French studies.

While in the Delaware Futures program, Taylor was able to go to Australia through the People to People Student Ambassador Program, which offers educational travel opportunities to high school students. He now lives in Japan, where he teaches English and French to high school students.

"I have been extremely blessed to have Delaware Futures in my corner," he said.

As with Taylor, Biden said many students need to have someone in their corner -- "someone to believe in them so that they can pursue their dreams."

"We all reap the benefits when our citizens are well educated. It means that our economies are more vibrant, our streets are safer and the future is brighter."
