At 40 Years of Age, SEEK Boasts Thousands of

By Curtis Stephen

Born and raised in the South Bronx, Letitia Wilkins grew up poor as her mother struggled to support the household by working two jobs. When she graduated high school, Wilkins had no aspirations for college. “I was supposed to be a clerical worker,” she recalls.

But after a futile job search, Wilkins took the advice of her brother’s girlfriend and decided to apply to City College through a program called SEEK. It was a decision, she says, that not only saved her life, but took her to heights she once did not believe possible.

Wilkins is today a Justice of the Supreme Court of the State of New York, one of thousands of men and women who once thought college was beyond their dreams but who went on to attain degrees through the SEEK program.

“I think it’s remarkable that SEEK has helped us to even be in high school at all, since many of us came from nothing. SEEK taught me a simple, but true lesson that has served me well throughout my entire life — that through hard work, I could achieve a better life,” she says. As Edlinson himself pointed out, SEEK is this day reflecting the demographic and other changes that have reshaped New York City and institutions in it over the past generation.

Once primarily an educational opportunity program catering to the city’s disadvantaged black and Puerto Rican youth, it has grown increasingly diverse in recent years.

“We’re seeing an explosion in the number of Latino, Asian and Eastern European students in the program, and we’re certainly pleased with that,” says Dr. Cheryl Williams, acting assistant dean for special programs.

There are currently 9,477 students enrolled in SEEK, which is only available at CUNY’s senior colleges, and 2,549 in College Discovery (the SEEK counterpart to the community colleges).

The latest available statistics show the following ethnic breakdown for SEEK students: 40.0 percent Hispanic; 28.6 percent Black; 18.4 percent Asian; and 12.8 percent White.

No such breakdowns were recorded before 1993. In the early years of the program, it was known that the vast majority of its students were black and Puerto Rican. SEEK, an acronym for Search for Education, Education and Knowledge, was born in the civil rights era, when New York and other cities and states were trying to correct serious racial imbalances in public schools and in higher education.

In May 1984, the Board of Higher Education and the state Board of Regents earmarked $500,000 for an experimental program at CUNY to attract high school students whose low grade point averages at schools in impoverished neighborhoods would have barred their admission to college.

The movement to place poor students into colleges with high standards was being advanced by activists and community groups through protests. Edlinson was among the strong proponents within CUNY, working closely with then Chancellor Albert H. Bowker.

The ambitious plan quickly won strong support among black and Latino members of the NY State Assembly, including Percy Sutton of Harlem and Shirley Chaudhury of Brooklyn, who battled with the legislature to ensure the creation of SEEK in 1966.

Open to any poor student younger than 30 who had never attended college, SEEK offered counseling, tutoring and remedial coursework in addition to supplying free books, a weekly stipend (then as much as $50), and a range of other services.

Aiming for Diversity

In the early 1970s, Debrah Fraser-Howie was a teenage parent with two daughters. She entered Hunter College through its SEEK program. The experience was difficult but character building, she says.

“Hunter wasn’t very diverse at that point and there was a perception that the SEEK student was less than adequate,” Fraser-Howie says. At Hunter, Fraser-Howie became a spokesperson for the SEEK students, joining forces with another Hunter SEEK student, Charles Baron.

The two activists started a SEEK magazine and held conferences to which they invited city leaders to talk about social issues of the day.

“We had to demand our fair share of the funding and resources,” Fraser-Howie says.

After graduating from Hunter with a bachelor’s degree in 1978, Fraser-Howie went on to become a major figure in the AIDS advocacy movement, drawing attention to the disease that has been decimating African-American communities across the nation.

In June of 1995, President Bill Clinton appointed her to serve on his Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS. Prior to that, she advised Mayor David Dinkins on HIV policy and was Vice Chair of the HIV Human Services Planning Council.

Of course, Charles Baron, the SEEK student who worked along with Fraser-Howie during their Hunter years, went on to become one of the best known elected officials in New York City. Today he is chair of the Higher Education Committee of the City Council.

Barron says he developed his political skills while at Hunter, as president of the SEEK Students Association.

He believes SEEK is as needed in the early 21st century, as it was a generation ago.

“SEEK is an invaluable opportunity that gives blacks and Latinos and working class families in general an opportunity to have a college education and pursue excellence,” he says.

In those early years when Barron and Fraser-Howie were part of it, SEEK was swathed in controversy, largely having to do with the racial tensions of the time. Dr. James Malone, who served as a SEEK director at City College in 1970, remembered ever-present racial tension around the University. Malone said tensions were especially high in those years at John Jay College.

“You had cops taking classes, in some cases...”

What SEEK Means to Them: A Doctor, an Executive, a Harvard Law Grad

Dr. Linda Gallaway graduated City College in 1975 and then received her M.D. from Boston University School of Medicine. She is an obstetrician/gynecologist at the Osceola County Health Department in Kissimmee, Florida. Originally from Brooklyn, she says SEEK rescued her from poverty, and worse. Her mother had schizophrenia and her father wasn’t around. “There will always be a need for SEEK,” she says.

John Sopelveda is a 1977 Hunter College graduate. Today he is chief executive officer of the National Association of Hispanic Real Estate Professionals While at Hunter, he was co-president of the SEEK student organization and was valedictorian at graduation. “I don’t need to be convinced of the program’s relevance. It works,” he says.

Carlos Ortiz graduated Lehman College with a degree in accounting in 1979, then earned his law degree from Brooklyn Law School. He is now General Counsel for Goya Food, the largest such Latino company in the United States. “If it wasn’t for SEEK, many of us would not have been able to lead good, productive lives,” he says.

Deborah Peterson Small graduated City College in 1983 and then earned her law degree from Harvard Law School. She is founder and executive director of Break the Chains, a group calling for prison reform.

“When I went to City College, I was 25 and a single parent... on welfare,” she says, adding that SEEK was her ticket to a more meaningful life.

Lovely Warren graduated John Jay with a bachelor’s in government in 2000 and

Charles Baron, chair of the City Council Higher Education Committee, was a SEEK student at Hunter College.

Deborah Peterson Small
Alumni, Including Many Who Reached the Top

Then earned a law degree from Albany Law School. She is now deputy counsel for Assemblyman David F. Gantt in upstate Rochester. Of her life, Warren says, "My Dad was an engineer, but he started doing drugs when I was 13… My Mom was the sole breadwinner at a Kodak factory." She says of SEEK, "Our counselors pushed us to the next level!"

Sasser graduated John Jay in 1999 and became a vice president at Sussie First Boston, where she worked for five years. Sasser, 29, is now attending Hofstra Law School. She says, "SEEK gave us a tremendous sense of accomplishment when we needed it most," she says.

William Anthony Rogers graduated with a degree in philosophy from City College 30 years ago. He then earned a master’s in urban affairs from Hunter College. Rogers is now director of Urban and Governmental Affairs at City College. He’s also a co-founder of the popular annual event known as Harlem Week. Of his youth he says, “I didn’t have college in mind, I wanted to be a numbers-runner.” After serving in the U.S. military, he became a father and decided he needed an education. SEEK allowed me to face my education. I didn’t think I would be able to do that. SEEK was a gift.”

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a Political Adviser, a Banker, a College Official, an Immigrant with Dreams

When a college student is surrounded by dreadful living conditions, the malevolent influence of the drug and street culture, the robberies, fires and riots, the high incidence of serious disease, coupled with poor medical attention and backgrounds generally so destructive that I constantly wondered whether I could have survived them.

Because of SEEK’s successes, and because of the changing times, there seems to be a general feeling nowadays among students that SEEK is a thing of value, very much worth going after.

One SEEK student says she has heard various remarks from students outside the program. “A lot of them don’t know about it and when you tell them, they say, ‘Wow, how can I get in?’” says Liu Shao, 20, a liberal arts student at Queens College.

Shao, who is entering her sophomore year this fall, emigrated from China with her parents and five siblings in 1994. While still attending Manh Bertgras High School for Business Careers, Shao was encouraged to apply to SEEK by her guidance counselor due to her family’s financial hardships and because it wasn’t doing too well in school.”

Shao concede that she was initially stimulated by the college experience when she arrived at Queens College, but was able to adjust quickly through SEEK. “When I first started, my English wasn’t very good and I wasn’t used to reading a lot of books. But the tutoring helped me,” she says. In fact, Shao decided to become a tutor herself this past summer, helping freshmen tackle math equations.

Individually, SEEK has fostered a system of mentorship that remains a central element of the program.

Funding is a Concern

Each academic year there is renewed concern among administrators about SEEK funding, which is determined by the governor and the New York State Legislature. Funding for College Discovery is through the New York City Council.

It is difficult to do any long-range planning in SEEK when there is this fear every year of being aired out,” explains Deon Williams After experiencing cuts in recent years, SEEK effectively lobbed for $14.6 million for the 2004-2005 academic year, but there’s no guarantee that the program will receive the same level of funding in the future.

Assemblywoman Debrah Click (D-Manhattan), a graduate of Queens College who has served on the Assembly’s Higher Education Committee for nearly three years, believes that SEEK remains just as important as ever.

“Over the last few decades, we’ve seen the door to higher education opened more and more, where only a few got in. SEEK is still offering a real opportunity and the Assembly has been consistently fighting to restore those funds,” Click said. Assemblywoman Click added her feeling that this year-a-year funding method through the state’s budget forces “allows for regular accounting and assessment” of the program, and that she sensed the possibility of greater receptivity to the SEEK program in the coming years.

Making Do With Less

Some administrators have said that the SEEK stipends of late have not kept pace with increased cost of living.

“Seek cover the differences, many of our students work nights,” said Dr. Mandel-Jonas, Browner, City College’s SEEK director. “It’s a major challenge.”

SEEK officials have had to think outside the box to maintain the program’s relevance, going beyond the basics of writing, literature and science. Often their focus is to try to keep their students afloat, psychologically and financially, as well as academically.

Last April, there was a joint SEEK and College Discovery student leadership retreat in Glen Cove, Long Island. Among the topics addressed at the two-day conference were job interviewing techniques and networking. Interpersonal skills and coping in a high-stress society were also part of the agenda.

“A lot of our students are already struggling with serious psychological, social and economic issues, but we’re also trying to teach them the critical skills they’ll need after they graduate college,” says Sceveletta Alford, director of SEEK at John Jay. “With the proper instruction, our students often prove that they’re survivors.”

From C’s to A’s

Sergio Reyes knows something about surviving — and striving to succeed.

Born in the Dominican Republic, Reyes, 45, entered the City College SEEK program as a psychology major in 2000. “I was divorced and the kids were grown, and I just decided that I had to do this for me.” Yet Reyes faced a significant hurdle. “When I got to college, I didn’t know how to write.”

On his first paper, he received a C+. But after his counselor intervened, Reyes adopted better study habits and honed his skills, displaying rapid progress. “By the time I started my next year, I was getting A papers,” he says.

Reyes would like someday to write a book someday about his experiences in SEEK, titled Making it From GED to Ph.D.

“We want people to see my growth,” Reyes says with a laugh. “I’m living proof of all the wonderful things SEEK can do.”

Dr. Paul Thompson says his SEEK counselor lifted him up in many ways.

Sazar Sasser, 19, is a sophomore at Queens College. Born in Uzbekistan, he and his family emigrated to the United States in 1993.

He is taking pre-med courses and says the SEEK counselors are the heart of the program. They “stay with you and give support.”

From CUNY TUES, to...