

Innovative Posse program graduates first class at Centre College

by Diane Johnson

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The first nine Posse students arrived from Boston in the fall of 2006, not quite sure what to expect of their new home, a small college in a small town in Kentucky. Now, as they graduate, at least one plans to remain in his new commonwealth, while others leave with positive feelings for a state and college they never dreamed would so touch their lives.

An innovative mentoring and leadership program based in New York, Posse is all about changing perceptions. It recruits promising urban high school students, molds them into a mutual support group—a posse—then matches them to mostly liberal arts, mostly non-urban colleges. The goal of the Posse Foundation is to prepare leaders. For the participating colleges—Centre included—it is a particularly effective way to bring multiplicity—"diversity"—to their student bodies.

Every college wants diversity, of course. But the word often comes encumbered with definitional baggage.

"Posse has changed Centre's understanding of what 'diversity' means," says Beau Weston, the Centre sociologist who served as mentor to the first class of Posse students. "Our expectation five years ago was the old Southern notion that there are white people and black people.... Diversity meant adding more black people to the white norm."

"What Posse has brought us are Boston kids-urban Northeasterners who are used to a world of all kinds of diversity of ethnicity, immigrant generation, class, family structure, and cosmopolitanism. We didn't just get black people, we got children of the African diaspora from Haiti, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Tanzania, and multiple generations in the U.S.A. 'Hispanic' in Kentucky normally means Mexican-Posse brought us the whole range of Spanish-speaking Central America and the Caribbean. East Asian immigrants are well represented. Even the white students turn out to be importantly Irish, German, Albanian, etc."

In many ways Posse I students became typical Centre students, with typically varied accomplishments and wide-ranging interests. In their four years at Centre, they honed majors in financial economics, music, psychobiology, English, French, and Spanish, among others. They have studied abroad, completed internships, joined varsity teams, gone Greek, and thrown themselves into campus life. Esther Derosena '10, a Spanish major from Boston's Dorchester neighborhood, graduated a term early and is planning on law school. Two will finish their requirements in the coming year.

But they also brought some unique challenges, not the least of which was trading life in the country's 10th-largest metropolitan area for one that's not even in the top 200. While urban New England and small-town South didn't exactly crash, they certainly needed some time to get to know one another.

"As the first Posse, we dealt with a lot of mixed feelings and misunderstandings about the program," notes Annie O'Brien '10, an anthropology and sociology major from the West Roxbury area of Boston.

From her perspective, those rough early days were eased in part by already knowing the other eight of Posse I when she arrived. Her comfort level increased a little more each year with each additional Posse.

"There was something about having new students with our backgrounds and experiences that made every year get a little easier," she says.

And that is the founding principle-and genius-of Posse: the notion that beginning their college adventure with a mutual support group-or posse-will help Posse students make it though to graduation.

O'Brien came to Centre with a passion for playing ice hockey, not as common in Central Kentucky as it is in her home city. But once here, she found new experiences that she values today.

"I've lived in a region I never thought I'd even visit, made amazing friends, grew as a student and leader, and was offered opportunities that I definitely would have missed out on at other schools," she says.

Perhaps most important to her was the decision to join a sorority. "I assumed leadership positions at every opportunity, attended the Kappa Kappa Gamma Leadership Academy as a junior, and went on to become Centre's Panhellenic executive vice president, overseeing risk management and education for the sorority community," she says. "By far, my role in Kappa has been my proudest achievement in college."

In September she will move to Germany, where she will join several other recent Centre grads working for the Army's Edelweiss Lodge and Resort.

Like O'Brien, Cynthia Estremera '10 initially felt a bit adrift.

"It was not easy flying just short of a thousand miles to a college that I had never heard of before I received the Posse scholarship," says the psychobiology and Spanish major whose parents are originally from Puerto Rico. "It was not easy to throw myself into this new state, yet alone region of the United States, far different from Massachusetts. It was not a smooth transition, and I feel that the same situation I went through could be said for other out-of-state and international students, as well. I wanted to transfer."

However, in time Estremera, too, found her niche. A talented musician, she played violin with the orchestra, and she helped start an elementary school mentoring program with the Danville city schools, which she hopes foreshadows adult-life accomplishments.

Her next step is graduate studies in school psychology at the University of Massachusetts-Boston. Ultimately she would like to start school-based programs to help students excel.

Most Posse students will return to urban areas, even if not Boston, when they're ready to settle down. José Ordoñez '10, on the other hand, hopes to put down roots in Kentucky.

Originally from San Pedro Sula, in the Central American country of Honduras, Ordoñez moved to Boston five years ago. After four years at Centre, however, he says he is "more of a Kentuckian than a Bostonian."

Although his life story already contained an international experience, he is like most Centre students in considering his semester abroad during college to have been transforming.

"Future students should definitely take advantage of such programs," he says. "Going to Merida, Mexico, was absolutely amazing. It gave me the opportunity to learn more about the Mayan culture and how it influences modern Mexico."

A financial economics major, he will spend the summer in the Dominican Republic helping to start a microlending business on a fellowship he received from NEST, a national non-profit with a chapter at Centre. After that, he says, he could see himself "settling down here in Kentucky."

Each year another new posse-about 10 students-enrolls at Centre. (Posse I was atypically just nine.) Posse V will enroll in September. They receive full-tuition scholarships and regular meetings with a Centre mentor for their first two years (although some of the reasons Posse students do well at schools such as Centre is that such schools already have an extensive support network for all students.) In return, Centre gets a valuable mix of race, class, and cultural backgrounds that have proved otherwise difficult to attract. Posse students now make up about 3 percent of the student body, enough to make a difference in campus culture.

"We like having the geographical diversity in the student body and a foothold in New England," says Carey Thompson, vice president for enrollment and student planning services, in explaining Centre's commitment to the program.

Another benefit: many more bi- and tri-lingual speakers. Several Posse I students grew up speaking languages other than English, including Creole, Spanish, or, like Harry Gerard '10, French.

Gerard came to Centre eager to play soccer, which he did. But he also appreciated the support he found both at Centre and through Posse's extensive pre-college preparation so that his initially limited English did not hold him back.

"During the last few months of Posse's training program, each scholar normally works with a tutor in English," he says. "That was particularly effective as far as improving my writing skills before Centre. I stayed in contact with my tutor over the course of my freshman year, e-mailing some of my papers to her so she could look at them. That really helped me get better at writing."

A French major at Centre, he plans to take a year off for research and travel before going to medical school.

When a college signs up with the Posse Foundation, it commits to offering scholarships, of course. It also provides the intensive, two-year mentoring each Posse group receives once on campus. But Posse participants bring as much as they receive.

A concrete example is the annual Posse Plus Retreat. Once a year, Posse students organize and hold a retreat that is open to the wider campus, as well. The retreats have covered such questions as "what is your identity," "who receives education," and "do we still need to talk about race."

Arlena Feraboli '10, from Worcester, Mass., near Boston, particularly values the Posse retreats. "There is something about being able to come together for a weekend and share personal and meaningful things about each other that is transformative," she says. "It's not like the retreats have made everything happy-go-lucky on campus, but I think it definitely has helped in creating a better sense of community."

A music and religion major who won the E. Wilbur Cook Music Prize at graduation, Feraboli adds that she loves "the liberal arts education and the ability to have a double major," while still being able to "take other classes just out of interest." Her internships spanned her academic interests-and two coasts-including a summer at the Universal Peace Federation (an interfaith organization) in Los Angeles, and back to Boston, where she interned at the Boston Children's Chorus. As for the future, she plans to work with the youth ministry at her church for a year, before applying to programs to teach English in Japan. Eventually, she hopes to earn a master's in music education and then teach.

The informal conversations-in Cowan, on a playing field, in a residence hall-probably have more of an influence than anything else on the wider campus, say a number of Posse I's classmates.

"Just having these students from Boston on campus has changed my views on many issues on campus and outside campus more than any class could have," says Jennifer Vernia '10, of Floyds Knobs, Ind. "There are more voices than just the Kentucky voice, which is a nice shock of reality to what the world is like outside our 'Centre bubble.'"

Anna Capaldi '10, of Franklin, Tenn., agrees. "Having so many students from an urban environment has brought many new ideas to Centre," she says. "People get to know individuals from a part of the country rich in various cultures to which they might have never been exposed.

"It has also increased awareness of the limitations of Centre's location and demographics," she adds. "Disillusionment isn't a bad thing. It has stirred up some dissatisfaction (which can lead to change)."

Which brings us back to Posse I's mentor.

Posse sells itself as a leadership program-"and it is," says Weston. "Sometimes that leadership is what you would expect, such as a Posse's strong presence in the International Students Association and the Diversity Student Union," he says. "Sometimes that leadership creates new things, like Centre's first online radio station." And then there are old issues that take on a new character.

"The debate about the 'Project Chick' fraternity party, which the college grown-ups had ineffectively objected to for several years, was effectively brought to a head," he notes, "when the fraternity was confronted by some actual women from the projects who objected to being objectified that way."

What Is Posse?

Posse is a mentoring and leadership program designed to match promising high school students with colleges looking to broaden their enrollment.

Educator Deborah Bial founded Posse in 1989 after a student told her that he would not have dropped out of college if he'd had his "posse" with him. She decided that a small group of students, carefully selected and prepared, could serve as a support system for one another. From

its New York City origins, Posse now recruits students in seven urban areas (Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, and Washington, D.C.), and has 38 partner colleges, including Grinnell, Middlebury, Oberlin, Sewanee, and Vanderbilt.

Bial won a \$500,000 John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur "genius" grant in 2007 for her efforts, and President Obama donated a portion of his Nobel Peace Prize award money earlier this year to support Posse's work .

Part of Posse's success comes from the extensive preparation it gives participants while still in high school. After making it through a rigorous selection process, Posse students spend the next several months bonding as a group and learning time management, writing, leadership, cross-cultural understanding, and other skills that will help them succeed in college.

As a result, Posse students as a whole graduate at a 90 percent rate, near Centre's rate of close to 87 percent and way above the private college four-year rate of 54 percent.

"We believe the Posse Foundation provides the ideal intersection between Centre's long-term interest in developing leaders and our deep need to provide a diverse experience for our students," said Carey Thompson, vice president for enrollment and student planning services, in pitching the program five years ago.

As the first Posse class at Centre goes out into the world, he remains convinced it was a good decision for the College.