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Posse-tive Leadership

Deborah Bial, founder of
The Posse Foundation, helps
thousands of students succeed
in college and beyond

Posse-tive Leadership

Founder of The Posse Foundation proves college students can achieve anything when they have their crew behind them

BY ADRIENNE MAND LEWIN

A Posse Scholar cohort in New York City



One is a product manager at Microsoft and founder of her college's Inclusivity in

STEM club. Another is an established physician who practices neonatal-perinatal medicine and has been published in several medical journals. A third has just started his senior year fresh from a term as his school's first Black male student government president with goals of a career in economic development, advocacy and politics.

In addition to academic and career success, what they all have in common is being a part of the Posse Foundation, as well as an abiding respect for

its president and founder, Dr. Deborah Bial, who conceived of the group 34 years ago, and has connected more than 12,000 Posse Scholars to top colleges and beyond with more than \$2 billion in free tuition and mentorship that extends for decades.

"Deborah is amazing and inspiring!" says Dr. Koryse Woodrooffe Ekouevi, a Posse alumna who works with the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia Care Network. "[She] is always so supportive and kind. She finds the positive in every situation and helps you to think of challenges as opportunities. The Posse program encourages us to celebrate our differences

and to learn from each other in order to use these differences to make a positive impact on our campus and in our world. Our Posse took this mindset with us and I think helped to make Vanderbilt University a more inclusive campus."

Posse itself has transformed from a way to increase college access and student happiness into a program heralded for its leadership development by heads of industry, entertainment and even President Barack Obama, who shared with the organization part of his Nobel Prize award money. Bial was awarded a 2007 MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship for her innovation with The Posse Foundation.

"Together with our incredible partner colleges and universities, we're building a leadership network that reflects the demographics of the American population so the people who sit at the tables where decisions are being made — in Congress, in the health industry, in the arts — the people making the decisions better reflect our country's rich diversity," Bial says of Posse's mission. "We are much, much more than a college success program."

At a time when the nation grapples with the implications of the Supreme Court's June ruling ending affirmative action and race-conscious admissions policies, The Posse Foundation

Deborah Bial surrounded by Posse Scholars



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE POSSE FOUNDATION

"My favorite thing about Debbie is her unscriptedness; she is genuinely speaking her mind all the time. I remember when we went to Chicago to accept our fellowship, she was introducing us, and there was a script, but she did not look at the script once, and what she spoke about and how she spoke it, I am certain, was way more impactful than the script because we could feel that it came from her heart. I thought that might be a one-time thing, but it was the same every time I interacted with her. Her energy could light up a room, and it's not a forced energy; she truly loves people, and you can see it by how she speaks and follows up with action; she is one of the few leaders I admire." — *Matt Menda*



"Debbie has a special gift of identifying untapped talent. Not only does she have the ability to see the untapped potential but also has the ability to cultivate that talent so it can flourish and contribute to others in the real world. Debbie has been a close mentor of mine and has helped me make some major career and life decisions. Her mentorship and guidance is invaluable to me. Debbie identified my talent at a time where I did not have the confidence to believe in myself and I am forever grateful for that. Without Debbie, I honestly do not think I would be where I am today and that is a testament to the power of The Posse Foundation." — *Amara Anigbo*



"Being a part of Posse has been life-changing for me. Despite being a poor, orphaned, immigrant growing up in Brooklyn, New York, I had huge dreams and aspirations. Ever since I was a little girl, I wanted to become a neonatologist to help little babies in need. The road to seeing this dream become a reality appeared impossible before Posse. Posse not only gave me the chance to attend an amazing university, Vanderbilt University, but I got the chance to attend this university with a group of people who understood me. I never felt alone or that I did not belong at Vanderbilt. During those long hours of studying and difficult course work, I had my Posse and Posse Mentor rooting for me and providing encouragement. ... We all fit so well together and some of us were even dorm mates at one point. It's inspiring to see all of the great accomplishments of my Posse members. I often tell my children about my Posse members and all of their amazing achievements in order to show them all of the different ways that they can contribute to making our society better." — *Koryse Woodrooffe Ekouevi*



— *Koryse Woodrooffe Ekouevi*

model stands out as an example of a merit-based program that organically increases the number of students from diverse backgrounds on campuses nationwide. And it all started with a surprisingly simple observation that having supportive peers is key to succeeding in college.

Back in 1989, Bial was two years out of Brandeis University and working for a nonprofit, the CityKids Foundation, a youth leadership and repertory company in the Tribeca neighborhood of Manhattan. She was surprised when a promising young student left college soon after he started. "He said, 'I never would have dropped out of college if I'd had my posse,'" Bial recalls. "It made sense, like a light bulb moment, to send a team of students together to college to back each other up. If you grew up in the Bronx and end up in Middlebury, Vermont, it's not rocket science [that there would be culture shock.]"

Bial founded The Posse Foundation with the goal to identify, recruit and train individuals with extraordinary leadership potential. Posse Scholars receive full-tuition leadership scholarships from its network of 64 partner colleges and universities. The first one onboard was Vanderbilt University in Nashville back in 1989. "It was a very homogeneous environment at the time. They said they'd love to try this. They took the first cohort of students from New York City and those young people knocked it out of the park. I think about the importance of Vanderbilt making that decision 34 years ago and attribute that to helping to make this possible."

Recruiting Rising Stars

Posse recruits students from more than 20 cities across the

United States, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Miami. To become a Posse Scholar, students are nominated by a school principal, college counselor or community-based organization and take part in a three-month-long selection process, the Foundation's Dynamic Assessment Process (DAP).

Each year, there are more than 17,000 nominations. As part of DAP, these nominees attend large group interviews where they engage in a series of interactive activities. "DAP allows us to look for leadership skills, communication skills, the ability to work in a team collaboratively, public speaking skills, problem-solving skills — things that are dynamic that you will not see on paper," Bial says. "It's the start of a holistic process."

Young people spend the time building robots out of LEGOs, discussing genetic testing with their peers and creating and presenting a public service announcement. In addition, students can be recruited for the Posse Arts Program, Posse Veterans Program and Posse STEM Program, and while they go into all different industries, about 50% choose a STEM major. "We're looking for those traits and qualities that to us represent potential and academic and leadership success," Bial notes.

About half of the students from the first-round DAP interviews are called back for individual interviews. Approximately 2,000 finalists are then selected to attend final group interviews for each partner college in groups of 20. The colleges meet with the finalists in those group interviews before picking 10, who are awarded a full tuition scholarship to attend the following year. What used to be a phone call is now an applause-, scream- and tear-filled

Zoom meeting with Posse staff and admissions officers informing scholars and their families of the good news. “It changes their lives forever,” she notes, adding, “We are the only program we know of that’s addressing issues of access and equity through the lens of merit. We don’t screen for race or need, just leadership and excellence.”

Once in a school’s Posse, from January to August of their senior year, students meet with their 10-person cohort and Posse staff for two-hour workshops addressing academic excellence, team building and support, and cross-cultural communication and leadership. They know each other well before they get to campus and continue to meet as a group with a faculty mentor each month. Posse staff visit four times a year to meet with scholars, campus liaisons and mentors, and during their first two years on campus, students meet with their mentors as a group weekly and individually every two weeks. They also attend a weekend-long PossePlus Retreat each spring exploring an important social issue.

“I loved that I had other people on campus who also understood the struggles of being 2,500 miles away from home,” says Amara Anigbo, 24, a Los Angeles native who graduated from Dickinson College in Pennsylvania where, in addition to founding the STEM club, she was president of Delta Nu Sorority. During her time as an undergraduate, Dickinson welcomed two cohorts of Posse Scholars to its campus each year. “The support and mentorship were invaluable. I still keep in touch with members of my Posse and others in the wider Posse community to this day.”

After ensuring the retention of Posse Scholars on campus, the

Foundation then connects Posse Scholars and alumni to highly coveted professional development opportunities through its Career Program. Posse partners with industry-leading companies, organizations and graduate schools to help scholars secure internships and leadership-track jobs, as well as access to career development workshops, career coaching, and graduate and fellowship opportunities.

The Posse Foundation has grown immensely in size and scope, with more than 250 Career Program partner organizations offering internships and jobs to scholars and Posse’s vast alumni network. And its Jeff Ubben Posse Fellows Program, established in 2016 and named for its former board chairman, awards five scholars in their sophomore year, with a GPA of 3.7 or higher, \$10,000 and a summer spent shadowing a major industry leader. Anigbo was a Jeff Ubben Posse Fellow paired with Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella and now is product manager for Microsoft’s Azure Database Platform.

A 2022 Jeff Ubben Posse Fellow, Matt Menda is a rising senior at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania who was paired with David Solomon, CEO of investment bank Goldman Sachs. “Posse is a network of people with unique stories who

► 1. Hamilton College Posse Scholar Carlos Villa with his mother; 2. Wheaton College Posse Scholars Anthony Waife, Amina Morgan; 3. Carleton College Posse Scholars; 4. Syracuse University Posse Scholar David Barbier Jr.; 5. DePauw University Posse Scholar Greisy Genao; 6. Dickinson College Posse Scholars Hanani Rodriguez, Isaiah Akinsanya and Afrin Rahma.





"It's hard to believe that three decades have passed since I first met Debbie. She and Posse have deeply influenced my approach in academia. My

research focuses on advancing anti-deficit ideas about underrepresented students. What stands out is the incredible knowledge, skills and resources they bring to higher education — and that's what Posse is all about. It's a proven model for how to create and sustain inclusive environments that serve all students."

— David Pérez II, Ph.D.,
associate professor, Syracuse
University School of Education



"Debbie believes in youth and has built a program that celebrates diversity, encourages individuality and inspires people to bring their whole

selves to the table. I love that Debbie notices the small qualities that make people special. It could be the way they lean in to listen, or the thing they do with their eyes when they are excited. ... Debbie says to youth, to colleges, to the world, 'This person is special; pay attention.' She did that for me as a 17-year-old high school student. She was interested in me, not just my GPA or SAT scores, but the way I moved through the world. Now that I am far along in my career, I try to channel Debbie so I can create that same wondrous and powerful environment."

— Erica Spatz, associate professor, cardiovascular medicine,
Yale School of Medicine

have not only passion but drive for intellect and leadership. ... Posse is where I have met my biggest mentors, been inspired by stories, seen so much passion followed with action, and so much intellectual curiosity and capacity," says Menda, who has his own unique experience as an Ethiopian native who has performed worldwide doing acrobatic stunts as a circus artist.

He adds that the fellowship opened even more doors through "the many senior leaders at Goldman Sachs who support and admire Posse that I now call mentors. Last year, while I was in New York doing my fellowship, many Posse alumni reached out and even invited me to their homes. As you can see, the benefit of Posse is very well-rounded; it's mentorship, friendship, opportunity, love and support."

As Bial says, "There's a 20-year-old who one day may be in their shoes. They get to experience what leadership looks like and at the same time, the leaders of today also get to send the message: 'I believe in these young people and one day I want you in my role.'"

Admissions Model

Bial is reluctant to discuss herself, preferring to let success stories like those of Woodroffe Ekouevi, Anigbo and Menda speak to Posse's impact. She shares that she was born in New York City and raised with a younger sister in nearby Teaneck, New Jersey. Her father played contrabassoon and bassoon with the New York Philharmonic, while her mother worked in public relations for the New York State Psychiatric Institute. She attended Teaneck's public schools before majoring in English at

Brandeis — "Loved it!" — and earned a master's in education from Harvard Graduate School of Education in 1996 before getting her doctorate from the program in 2004.

Bial lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan with her husband of almost 20 years, former *New York Times* op-ed columnist Bob Herbert, who shares her passion creating opportunities for others. A voracious reader, she likes nothing more than diving into a good Maggie O'Farrell novel. She and Herbert enjoy throwing dinner parties for their friends, including Rasan Salandy, a Posse Scholar from Vanderbilt who joined the Posse staff in 2006 and is now vice president for external affairs. As anyone affiliated with Posse will attest, once you're in, you're family.

She's proud of Posse's diverse board and the relationships the organization has established, a who's who in every possible industry and the government, including the Obamas, former education secretary Arne Duncan, actor John Leguizamo and journalist Lesley Stahl. Bial is also excited about a new partnership with the Miranda Family Fund, (founded by the Pulitzer Prize, Grammy, Emmy and Tony Award-winning songwriter, actor, producer and director Lin-Manuel Miranda) for the Arts Posse initiative that matches dancers, graphic artists, actors and musicians in Posse at CalArts, Bard College and the University of North Carolina School of the Arts. Posse also is working with the Mirandas to recruit students from Puerto Rico.

As the college admissions landscape has changed, Bial believes others can follow the example of The Posse

Foundation, where many scholars are from under-resourced Black and brown communities. "Posse has a unique role to play in the conversation moving forward because we are rooted in the values of equity and inclusion, in this belief that everyone should be represented in leadership positions in every industry. The program we've designed is a completely holistic way of identifying talent ... taking the strongest candidates, the young people with the greatest potential to excel. Our process doesn't screen for traits like race or need, so I think that our merit model is going to be hugely significant moving forward," she says.

"Even though we don't screen for race, we still have incredible diversity in our cohorts — 80% are Black and Latinx, 10% are white, 10% are Asian, over 50% are first generation. A Posse can have a Jewish student and Pakistani student and Dominican student and an Indonesian student. Our young people really are incredibly diverse, but we don't screen for that."

Bial adds that colleges and universities themselves should reflect on what attracts diverse students. "I think that we tend to look at our challenges and problems, for example, racism and underrepresentation, and say, 'Well, there's not enough people of color who meet the college's requirements.' ... But there's not always something wrong with the population; often there's something wrong with us and our systems and our institutions and our society. We should be looking in the mirror and thinking of what we can fix there ... and if we can address that, we'll see improvement in the representation of young people in our colleges." ■