

Leeta Jordan & Mimi Wrede, Montclair Scholarship Fund:

Banking on the Future With A Little Help From the Past (and Present)

BY GRACE L. WILLIAMS

PHOTOGRAPH BY NEIL GRABOWSKY, THROUGH THE LENS STUDIOS

IF THERE IS ONE THING THAT IS a certainty at the outset for Leeta Jordan and Mimi Wrede, it is that they love living in Montclair--almost as much as their shared passion to help get high schoolers funds to help their future education plans. Things they enjoy about Montclair itself that sit at the top of their lists include the town's green spaces and walkability near their respective homes.

Mimi and her family live in the Fairway section of town. "We love it here with all the parks and its history of being a golf course," she says. "It feels very peaceful with a neighborhood in the front and a park in the back." Meanwhile, Leeta's family lives near King's food market, "we love being able to walk to town and the train," she says. "It's so convenient."

■ IN THE COMMUNITY

Although their children are mostly "grown and flown," both women raised their families here and sing their praises about what makes the community special, the personal is communal as they work to shed light on a hidden need within the community; helping high schoolers in financial need secure funds for college or trade school through the Montclair Scholarship Fund.

Mimi has a background in public relations while Leeta worked at one time for David Dinkins in New York City, attended law school, and took time out of the paid workforce to be a stay-at-home parent. For most parents, that phase of life (whether going the stay-at-home or otherwise route) typically involves a meet-up (or fifty) with fellow families on a similar trajectory.

Volunteering for sports and school events and

activities often proves to be a fantastic way to crack into what's up with the immediate community. For Mimi, those moments also solidified her understanding that not everyone in town comes from the same background or has access to the same resources. "I knew and was so impressed by classmates and teammates who were on the same journeys as my children but traveling it solo, without parental or financial support," she says.

■ WORKING TOGETHER TO CLOSE GAPS: THE MONTCLAIR SCHOLARSHIP FUND

About eight years ago, Leeta and Mimi learned about and got involved with the Montclair Scholarship Fund (MSF), a long-standing opportunity for high school students with roots that stretch back to 1957. Regardless of their backgrounds, all Montclair high schoolers are encouraged to apply for a scholarship, which awards recipients an average of \$7,500, but spans a spectrum of anywhere from \$5,000 to \$20,000 in funds to cover tuition costs for college or trade school. The two met when their youngest children were in Pre-K together and have been MSF Co-presidents since the fall of 2020.

To say they are passionate about MSF and what it does would be a gross understatement. Despite the town's appearance to have an abundance of resources and affluence, both women stress that in Montclair, there is still a very real need for assistance when it's time to pay for school. "Even though Montclair is seen as an affluent community we have several students who have great financial need," says Leeta. "It's our mission to help this most vulnerable population graduate with less debt."







For Leeta, her daughter, who currently plays field hockey in college, serves as a tangible reminder about how expensive school has become. She's a Sophomore this year, but they are already preparing for the sticker-shock-inducing \$180,000 it will cost for her to finish out her final two years of school. "Her school is private," says Leeta, while pointing out that even the cost of state school tuition has become shockingly high these days. For an NJ resident attending Rutgers, for instance, the total cost has crept to \$31,954 when including room and board, according to their website.

But getting into school and then getting onto campus are just two obstacles a student or their family faces regarding university life. Materials, supplies, textbooks, and even dorm furnishings like chairs and shampoo can and do add up. To help offset some of these more practical incidental costs, MSF offers "book" grants of \$500 apiece that help students cover things like the aforementioned items.

■ KEEPING HOPE ALIVE

One of the biggest challenges the Montclair Scholarship Fund Faces comes through one of the most practical dilemmas of them all; visibility and awareness. Mimi and Leeta say that with so many other Montclair-specific "M" titled programs already out there and doing great work (MFEE, Montclair Foundation, etc.,) it's not always easy to differentiate from them. But with enough spreading of the word and publicity, they hope to

POSING WITH PRIDE:
Past recipients of the Montclair Scholarship Fund strike a pose on their way to brighter futures that also include less student loan debt.
 Photos Courtesy of the Montclair Scholarship Fund

preserve the rich legacy of great work the program presents.

Every June, they participate in the award ceremony at the high school where hopeful students, who've applied for a MSF scholarship, learn about the financial award they will receive to help pay for the college or trade school they will attend. These emotional moments together also represent so much of the hidden behind-the-scenes work the MSF conducts to bring the students this magic.

The Montclair Scholarship Fund itself is a fully volunteer-run 501c(3) organization with no formal offices of its own. "We work from our dining rooms," says Mimi. Its board meets when it can and donations are solicited through initiatives like the fund's annual appeal. Mimi and Leeta always enjoy meeting with potential donors interested in creating a scholarship or making a general donation. Every dollar raised goes right back toward financial assistance for students, making donations like last year when two anonymous donors stepped up and contributed \$100,000 each, which was paramount to keep things going. "We hope more generous folks will come out of the woodwork, recognizing higher education as a priority for all," says Mimi. "It's truly a lifelong gift--a stepping stone to opportunity and a future—for the community from the community." ■

To volunteer or support, please reach out to Mimi and Leeta at info@montclairscholarshipfund.org

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