

# PARTNERS IN OPPORTUNITY

## *The Achieve Program at Riordan*

by Victoria Terheyden

“Not everyone has a Mrs. Bakar; imagine what would happen if they did,” said Dijon Morrisette ’08. He is referring to Barbara Bass Bakar, the founder of Achieve, a program that serves first generation to college and low-income high school students.

“We are so lucky to have the Achieve program at Riordan because it gives us the opportunity to work with so many wonderful students who would not have had the financial means to attend our school,” said Principal Vittorio Anastasio ’84. “The Achieve Program and Barbara’s vision is naturally aligned with the mission of our school—we want to see all of our students graduate ready for success and to give back to society in one way or another.”

Achieve began at Archbishop Riordan High School in 1997 and now works with 78 students at four Bay Area high schools: Riordan, Holy Names in Oakland, Saint Joseph Notre Dame in Alameda, and Mercy San Francisco. Currently there are 24 students in the program who attend Riordan.

Bakar grew up in Florida. She recalled that her family, by no means wealthy, always looked out for the needs of others; her parents often picked up the tab for groceries when they sensed a family was in need. Bakar would go on to lead several successful retail firms, but was always thinking about ways she could foster change. When she first started Achieve, she quickly learned that more support

services were the key to creating opportunities in the long-term.

“For first generation to college and low-income students, it is very important to have a support system in a school setting,” said Oliver Wijayapala ’13, a junior at Middlebury College in Vermont. “Achieve helped create that support system.” The program provides academic support, college counseling, cultural enrichment, internship opportunities, and a chance for students to plant seeds for their future.

According to Alex Rivera ’88, a Riordan alumnus who serves as an on-site program coordinator at Riordan and Saint Joseph, Achieve is so much more than a tuition grant. “At its core Achieve is a leadership program where we strive to create a culture of philanthropy and service in each of our students,” he said.

### Community Involvement

Achieve participants are certainly giving back. They must complete 40

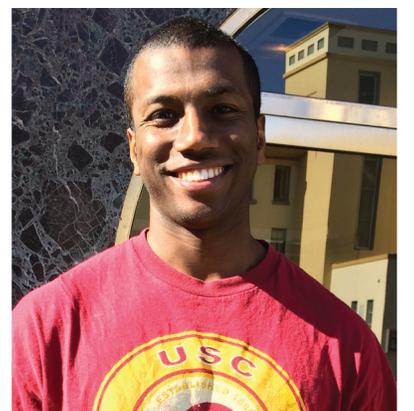
hours of community service per year at the Jewish Home. This service experience also encourages them to keep exploring ways they can impact the world.

Wijayapala is a volunteer firefighter with the Middlebury Fire Department and a Student Wellness Leader, in addition to majoring in Theatre with minors in Education Studies and Chinese Language. Dijon Morrisette, a 2012 graduate of USC, credits his Achieve experience at Riordan for helping him develop a career interest that combines finance with helping the public good. Currently Dijon is working as a Vice President for Academy Securities and just passed the Series 7 exam.

### Cultural Enrichment

One of the unique aspects of the Achieve program is a focus on cultural enrichment. Students attend cultural events including theater and dance performances. “Achieve encouraged me to explore the visual and perform-

Riordan alumni of the Achieve Program (l-r): Oliver Wijayapala, Dijon Morrisette, Kenya Dumetz, and Hector Navarro.



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ing arts at Riordan,” said Hector Navarro '14. “It was through art and music, as President of the Art Club and member of the Crusader bands, that I discovered leadership,” Now a sophomore at Santa Clara University, Navarro is taking both his musical and leadership skills to the next level in his role as a trumpet player for SCU’s first-ever mariachi band.

Achieve believes that exposure to the arts is fundamental for leaders to develop a dynamic set of skills, which is also echoed in Riordan’s arts-rich academic curriculum. “Decision makers need to be creative,” said Morrisette. “Be around things and people that help you develop creative ideas.”

## Work Experience

While in high school, Achieve students participate in a yearly six-week summer internship. “Achieve prepares students for the real world by setting up internships to gain the experience of what work life is like,” said Kenya Dumetz '14, a sophomore and prospective psychology major at Ohio Wesleyan

University. During his time at Riordan he interned at local toy company Wild Planet, and later at the Exploratorium where he was a high school explainer. Morrisette interned at Merrill Lynch, and Wijayapala at First Republic Bank and Duty Free Shopping at SFO. Following the art theme, Navarro worked at the SF MOMA, where he was “exposed to some of the best art in the world” while learning about the operations of a top-notch museum.

## Ready for College

Parents, Achieve and the partner schools are equal parts in the equation for student success. “We have a team approach in supporting the program, starting with the admissions process and helping Achieve identify prospective students for the program,” said Principal Anastasio. English instructor Diana Assereto serves as the school liaison to Achieve and works closely with Rivera, students, families and other Riordan faculty and staff members to facilitate communication across the board.

“I feel honored to work with such an amazing, well-structured program that offers tremendous academic and personal support while teaching accountability and stewardship,” said Assereto. “Riordan is fortunate to have these dedicated students and to work with a program like Achieve.”

Upon graduation from high school, 100% of Achieve students matriculate to college and 85% attend out-of state institutions. “At the end of four years, Achieve students are ready for the next phase of their education, and whatever else comes their way,” said Achieve program coordinator Rivera.

In the Achieve Program, students find mentors, cheerleaders, and a second family, but also an understanding of the meaning of service and the structures in place to serve now and in the future. Dumetz summed it up: “Achieve wants you to explore the world and give back.” From the reports on these students, they very much do.



### Apply to the Achieve Program:

In addition to completing an admissions application with a partner school, students must be first generation to college, have a minimum GPA of 3.0, and demonstrate financial need. For more information please visit [www.achieveprogram.org](http://www.achieveprogram.org). Applications are due by December 11, 2015.

