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## Living

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The Fund For The Needy

## Paving the way for youth's success

Atlantic Street Center's youth-development program, supported by The Seattle Times Fund For The Needy, offers academic support and leadership training for disadvantaged kids in Seattle's NewHolly neighborhood.

By Jonathan Martin

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The Northwest School is just six miles from Soriya Ton's home in a South Seattle public-housing complex, but her journey to the elite private school has crossed a chasm of class and culture.

Ton's parents survived the killing fields of Cambodia to settle nearly two decades ago in what is now NewHolly. Her 56-year-old father has severe dementia, likely brought on by war trauma, and her mother scratches out a living selling produce from her garden. No one in her family — she is the youngest of five — attended a university.

But Ton, 18, is likely to have her pick of schools. Her promise helped earn her a scholarship to the Northwest School worth about \$25,000 a year. Although she is shy as a shadow, Ton seized the opportunity to start an Asian-American student group. She plays Ultimate Frisbee and aspires to be a pediatrician.

She attributes her drive in part to years spent in the Atlantic Street Center's NewHolly youth-development program: part leadership tutelage, part academic boot camp for disadvantaged kids.

That's the mission of Atlantic Street Center, a 101-year-old nonprofit that is supported by The Seattle Times Fund For The Needy.

The goal for the youth-development program is to have each of its 130-or-so kids finish each year of school on time and on track, no matter the backstory.

"We sell our kids short by having short expectations," said Sue Siegenthaler, head of Atlantic Street's NewHolly center.

She first met Ton when the girl was 3, and watched as Ton, with support from her family and guidance from Atlantic Street, learn to assert herself.

"Soriya stuck with it from the beginning, and is now on a trajectory for college," said Siegenthaler.

### **Homework, leadership**

On a recent evening in the Atlantic Street's NewHolly teen center, a gaggle of teenage boys, all East African youth wearing cuffed jeans and hoodies, listened as a teacher described the basics of the SAT test.

"You get 600 points just for spelling your name?" one boy said, his face lit up.

Atlantic Street focuses intensely on academics. "We're *really* big on homework," jokes Marquinta Williams, youth-development coordinator.

That's because many NewHolly families are recent immigrants from East Africa or Southeast Asia, with parents who sometimes lack the language or educational backgrounds to check their kids' schoolwork. "It's essential to have structured time to get them to focus on academics," said Williams.

Amid the study-hall sessions, Atlantic Street also seeks to cultivate leadership. It asks students to plan and execute community-service projects, such as installing traffic circles at NewHolly.

"Those are the kids who do well in life, if they're able to provide leadership in school, their jobs, in life," said Edith Elion, executive director of Atlantic Street.

### **Blending cultures**

In Ton's native Cambodian culture, children don't speak up in class, never question authority, evade talking about their feelings, said Siegenthaler.

"You are more likely to accept and be a sponge," she said. "The biggest challenge for her is to be a sponge — *and* be willing to explore and check things out with others."

Through a connection on her Ultimate Frisbee team, Ton learned of the Northwest School, on First Hill. It has an arts-and-humanities focus (Stone Gossard of Pearl Jam is an alum) and a dormitory for international students. Nearly all graduates go on to four-year universities. Many in the student body are from wealthy families.

"She has a real presence and strength," said Lisa Beemster, Ton's adviser at the Northwest School. "It's very evident kids look up to her and respect her."

But very few other students know her background, Beemster said.

Ton's father wandered off last year, and after a frantic search was found on Beacon Hill. Ton turned the incident into material for her poetry; her college-admission essay focuses on her

father.

Ton's years with Atlantic Street's leadership training paid off at a 2010 national student diversity conference in San Diego. She came back with a plan to start an Asian-American student group at Northwest School, and helped plan a cultural diversity night.

Attending and later working in Atlantic Street's programs, Ton had learned a valuable lesson — about planning events and planning for life.

"I realized there was a lot more time and effort behind something than what you see," she said.

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