

# ASPIRE helps Sisters High School students find their path

By Erin Borla  
Correspondent

A new crop of Sisters High School graduates has set off into the future. And they've had some help determining what their path into that future might be.

All juniors and seniors at Sisters High School (SHS) receive an opportunity to work with the ASPIRE (Access to Student Assistance Programs In Reach of Everyone) program. The program, managed by Rick Kroytz, a half-time grant-funded contractor, and two volunteers — Diane Russell and Phyllis Smith — has been an extension of the Sisters High School counseling department for over 10 years.

ASPIRE is a mentoring program that matches trained and supportive adult volunteers from the community with high school students to develop a plan to help them meet their education goals beyond high school. Volunteers are trained through the program and help students have a successful transition into their preferred field after graduation. The entire ASPIRE program is paid for through grants and supported by community volunteers.

Kroytz, Smith, and Russell manage 37 volunteers with varying backgrounds from parents to professors — including teachers, business owners, lawyers, retired military, computer-technology professionals and college administrators. Through the 2015-2016 school year, the volunteers contributed well over 1,000 hours to the students of Sisters High School.

"ASPIRE takes the burden off the parents to help the students realize their personal potential," said Kroytz. "I love seeing how the kids grow from when we start with

them in the fall, when they may not necessarily have a vision. We are a cheerleader and a problem-solver for them."

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Students are supported through a variety of post-graduate options including identifying and applying to four-year universities, two-year colleges, trade school or military service. Many students may not have any idea what they would like to do after high school while others, like Junior Zidane Galant, know exactly what they are interested in studying.

"The ASPIRE program helped me to figure out which colleges fit me — in learning style, location, or programs offered," said Galant. "I was interested in the nursing field before meeting with my mentor, and they showed me schools that would help me with this goal."

Engaging students in the planning effort, volunteers work alongside students and guide them through preparing resumes, exploring and identifying careers, researching schools and making college visits, practicing for and taking placement exams, selecting and applying for colleges, identifying and planning for college costs, and applying for and winning scholarships

and financial aide.

"The ASPIRE program helped me determine my post-graduate plans by showing me my options," said senior Dallas Knoop. "They showed me how to find schools I might want to attend, helped me narrow down the list and then showed me the process of how to apply."

"Both my son and daughter went through the ASPIRE program," said new volunteer Kate O'Hern. "To us it was amazing and a great relief that the kids had one person who stood beside them through the whole process. The mentors were their (the kids) biggest fans. They always rooted them on."

Each year, every junior or senior that wants the services — this year about 85% of those students or 80 juniors and 90 seniors — have eight hours working with a mentor. Mentors and students are armed with a to-do list. The list is broken down with things to accomplish during the students' junior year, and by trimester for their senior year.

"We help the students develop a plan of action," said volunteer Phyllis Smith.

The volunteer mentors spend time building trust with the students, and offer them a

different voice and presentation, someone other than a teacher or parent.

"I chose to be a mentor because we are so very grateful for the help our kids got through ASPIRE," said O'Hern. "We truly believe that our kids are in better colleges because of the program. It also helped our two kids navigate through ways to get the most amount of scholarships, which, for us, was a huge blessing."

In 2015, ASPIRE along with Sisters GRO facilitated \$158,000 worth of scholarships to Sisters High School graduates.

In addition to the meetings with students, Kroytz and his mentors coordinated events throughout the year for students and their families, including hosting 25 different college representatives at the high school. Families and their students participated in College Planning Night in October; Financial Aid Planning Night in November; Scholarship Application Pizza Night in January; and the Oregon Public Universities Tour in April, where eight public universities from across the state were available for students at SHS.


"Without the ASPIRE

program I would have been lost in planning for my future," said Knoop. "I would not have known where to begin or what steps to take without their dedicated help. The volunteers were patient, kind and always followed up, making sure I was tracking along until the very end."

"I enjoyed working with my ASPIRE mentor — it was actually fun," said Knoop. "Planning for college is beyond stressful, numerous little things to do and get down with deadlines racing toward you from all directions. With ASPIRE breaking things down, the weight was lifted from my shoulders, and everything just became so manageable, even exciting."

In the last year, ASPIRE has added over 25 volunteers to the program at SHS, and they are always looking for more. Community members interested in volunteering need to be approved by the school district and willing to commit for a full year of service to the program.

"As of today, ASPIRE is the only real in-school option for our students to prepare for and plan for a realistic future," said Kroytz. "This program is the critical tipping point for our students' post-graduation success."



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