

EDITORIAL

# Helping town's college bound

**I**t's hard to imagine that in a place like Wellesley, where so many families move to take advantage of the top-notch public school system and more than 84 percent of residents age 25 and over have bachelor's degrees or higher, that there are families where no one yet has a college degree. Yet that's the reality, and for children who want a higher education but have no one to show them the ropes – everything from the basics of financial aid to filling out the Common Application to finding transportation to campus

visits – it can be tough.

Now there's help available, and it relies largely on volunteer mentors. Started by Wellesley Friendly Aid volunteers Margot Lansing and Sharon Kiernan, Wellesley Connects was launched in the fall of 2016, in cooperation with the high school principal and guidance staff. They also consulted with those who direct similar programs at Newton North High School and Needham High School. Friendly Aid and the Fund for Wellesley support the program. The students are paired with mentors in their junior

year, an early start on a successful road to college.

It took an idea, two women committed to making it happen, and local organizations willing to help. And it's working.

All of the 2018 students in the program are headed to college. Instead of being overwhelmed when they get there, they will have a good idea what awaits them and how to maneuver through those difficult few months. They are prepped for success.

And maybe someday, diploma in hand, they will become mentors themselves.

The

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## Help for college bound

**Wellesley Connects helps first-generation college students navigate the application process**

By Abby Patkin  
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As his senior year of high school drew closer, the college application process remained something of a mystery to Zach Stoudemire.

For the soon-to-be first-generation college student from Wellesley, the application process was still something of a novelty. His sister had gone to college, but she had handled the application on her own, and his mother, a hairdresser, remained unfamiliar with the process.

"It's pretty new for the whole

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**Wellesley Connects co-founders Sharon Kiernan (second from left) and Margot Lansing (far right) pose with six of the program's 2018 graduates.**

[COURTESY PHOTO/  
SHARON KIERNAN]

# HELP

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family, going to college," said Stoudemire, a 2018 Wellesley High School grad.

With an increasingly complex admissions process, some first-generation students like Stoudemire face challenges simply applying, according to Sharon Kiernan, co-founder of mentorship program Wellesley Connects. Whether it's unfamiliarity with applications or difficulty filling out paperwork in a non-native language, first-gen students can find themselves at a disadvantage, she explained.

Serving first-generation college-bound Wellesley High School juniors and seniors, Wellesley Connects offers students help navigating the college application process, from standardized tests to campus visits to the Common Application.

## Bright horizons

After hearing of similar programs for first-gen students in Newton and Needham, Kiernan and her neighbor, Margot Lansing, teamed up to start a program that would help college-bound Wellesley students.

"I felt that there must be some families who could use someone who's had the experience with the process," Kiernan said. After months of preparation and research, they launched two years ago under the Wellesley Friendly Aid Association, with a grant from the Fund for Wellesley to support startup costs.

The program pairs each student with a mentor, an adult volunteer who can help guide them through the college process.

"We're looking for people who have real, on-the-ground experience, recent college admissions experience with their own children," Lansing explained.

Depending on the student's needs, mentors can provide transportation to college visits, help students

research schools and apply for financial aid, and offer other guidance in the application process, Kiernan said. "They fit the need of the student in front of them," she said. The group as a whole meets approximately once a month, but individual student/mentor pairs can meet more often as needed.

The program begins in January of a student's junior year, and this first graduating class had nine or 10 students, Kiernan and Lansing said, although the numbers fluctuate as students join the program late. Most importantly, they said, all of the 2018 graduates are going on to college.

The rising senior class has 14 students and, with summer break just around the corner, Lansing and Kiernan are already planning next year's recruitment.

The program is especially good for students who "have no idea what they're doing or just want something to work off of and someone to help apply to college," said Stoudemire, a member of the first Wellesley Connects graduating class.

"Then you're not in the dark about whatever college has to offer," he added.

## Staying on track

For Stoudemire, the program was most useful in helping him manage deadlines.

"I could never get things done on time, or I always had trouble with it, so Wellesley Connects really helped me have a set schedule and helped me with my applications and everything that I needed to get done on time so that it wasn't all for last minute," he said.

But his mentor, Gwen Cheek, didn't have to stay on top of him too much. "Zach made it an easy process as he was focused on the process and had a goal in mind," she wrote in an email to the Townsman.

In turn, having someone to provide support and bounce ideas off was a great help, Stoudemire said of Cheek.

"Our bond really grew through this program, because she helped

me so much with all the things that I needed to do, keeping me on track and also just asking me how I've been," he said.

Cheek, Wellesley Public Schools' assistant to the assistant superintendent of teaching and learning, had previously met Stoudemire while working in the office at Wellesley Middle School. She is already mentoring another student, whom she has encouraged to join Wellesley Connects.

Stoudemire is still deciding his plans for next year; he's between going directly to Merrimack College or spending a year at Massachusetts Bay Community College before transferring to Merrimack. Still, his college plans are no small feat — especially to his family.

"I think they're proud," Stoudemire said. "They've shown me a lot, and they've been really supportive. They've been by my side whenever I needed them, and I just think it's crazy for them for me to go to college, just because it seems like it's all happening so fast."