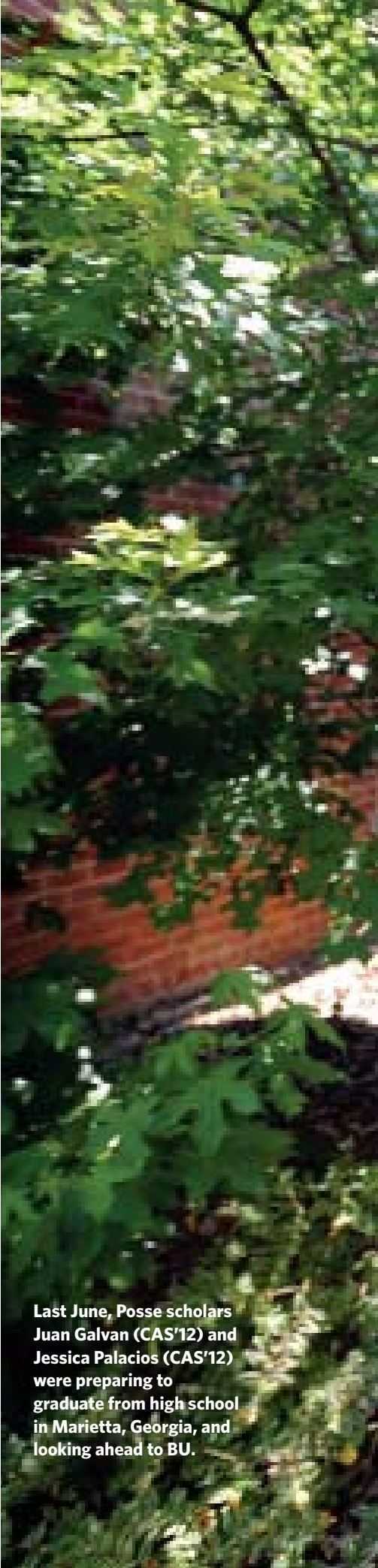


For the **twelve kids** attending BU on a **special scholarship** for **urban students**, getting to college is only the latest obstacle they've overcome. To handle the ones that lie ahead, it helps that they have **each other**.

It's an Honor Thing

BY CALEB DANILOFF



Last June, Posse scholars Juan Galvan (CAS'12) and Jessica Palacios (CAS'12) were preparing to graduate from high school in Marietta, Georgia, and looking ahead to BU.



When Shaylithia

Copeland was a freshman at Carver High School in inner-city Atlanta, only a third of the seniors graduated, fights were common, and student pregnancy was, too. Faculty morale was at rock bottom, and SAT scores were the lowest in all of Georgia. Not exactly the type of school lighting up the radar screens of the nation's top colleges and universities. Circumstances that might have doomed other students — that doom students in urban high schools across the country every day — had little impact on Copeland. The eighteen-year-old's resilient, expansive personality had been forged years earlier.

"I come from your typical drug-infested, high-pregnancy, shootings-every-night type of neighborhood," says Copeland, who hails from Summerhill in Police Zone Three, considered Atlanta's worst crime district. "I've lost a lot of people to murder. That's what helped me say, 'I'm not going to stay here.' That's always been my motivation: to get up and out, and make an impact."

Despite the odds, Copeland, who graduated with a 3.6 GPA, is now a freshman at Boston University, the first in her family to attend college. She is one of twelve Atlanta-bred first-year students — nine African-Americans, two Hispanics, and one Caucasian — who have been guided to BU by the Posse Foundation, a national nonprofit scholarship program

that recruits and trains groups of talented and motivated urban students — usually from public schools — for life on university campuses. The program aims to help a traditionally underrepresented group of students succeed in college, and in so doing, to nurture a new generation of urban leaders. And from the perspective of BU and the thirty-one other colleges and universities that have joined the program, Posse does something essential: it brings highly qualified students of color to campus, helping these institutions become more representative of America's increasingly diverse demographics.

"To me, it's obvious," says Jeffrey Allen, a School of Management assistant professor of information systems and the mentor to BU's inaugural class of Posse scholars. "If you're around BU and you don't see that there is a problem in terms of minority students here, particularly black students, I'd have to say you're walking around with blinders on."

COPELAND (COM'12) WAS SCHOOLED by the streets she and her single mother spent their lives on, nestled southeast of downtown between Turner Field and Zoo Atlanta and hemmed in by two interstates. Although the 1996 Olympics helped usher in a period of revitalization, the years prior were colored by "the usual clichés," Copeland says: condemned housing, vacant lots, drugs, gunfire. By the early 1990s, the population had shrunk from a one-time high of 20,000 residents to 3,500, nearly all of them poor and African-American.

"Growing up the way I did helped make me a determined young lady," Copeland says. "I can never say, 'I can't do it.' My mom says, 'Well, my momma kicked me out when I was pregnant with you, so I know you can do it.'"

At BU, Copeland jumped in feet first, striding up and down Comm. Ave. like she owned the place. She delivered meals to Boston AIDS patients as part of the First-Year Student Outreach Project, a community service week for incoming freshmen, which the entire posse took part in. On day one of classes, Copeland led a group of lost freshmen to their classroom in Mugar Memorial Library.

Although she is the only African-American in her Women, Society, and Culture class, Copeland says she hardly feels alone. "I love my classmates," she says. "It's a lot easier to communicate across cultures than I thought. I thought people would have preconceived notions about African-Americans in general, and African-Americans from the South, and that it would be hard to talk to people because there would be stigmas attached to who I am. But it's not like that. There's



SHAYLITHIA COPELAND (COM'12), at home in Atlanta last June, has always been motivated to make a difference.



The 411 on Posse

Education strategist Deborah Bial founded the Posse Foundation in 1989 in New York. Today, it also has programs in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C. It has placed 2,200 students at thirty-two colleges and universities around the country, representing \$220 million in scholarships.

JESSICA PALACIOS is adjusting to life on BU's urban campus, but she misses her mother's cooking.

Posse has a 90 percent college graduation rate — significantly higher than the national average.

Some 30 percent of Posse alumni have gone into education, 30 to 40 percent have entered the corporate world, and about 45 percent hold an advanced degree or currently attend grad school. The oldest alumnus is thirty-seven years old.

This year, some 9,000 high school seniors, mostly from urban public schools, were nominated by teachers, guidance counselors, and community leaders for 410 scholarships. In Atlanta, 500 candidates are being considered for twenty spots — ten at BU, and ten at the College of Wooster in Ohio.

By 2020, Posse hopes to recruit 1,000 scholars a year from ten cities to attend eighty colleges and universities.

a Peruvian girl, a Jewish girl in my class. A lot of my classmates are minorities. I'm just a piece of the puzzle. Each of us has a story to tell.”

POSSE WORKS BY CONNECTING select groups of students in urban centers around the country with participating universities, which in turn provide full-tuition scholarships to those students they admit. To date, Posse has placed 2,200 students in thirty-two colleges and universities. (Posse is also creating an online database for partner schools to mine the thousands of candidates nominated by teachers, guidance counselors, or community leaders but not selected for scholarships.)

Minorities make up one-third of the U.S. population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, and their numbers are increasing. The self-identified Hispanic population, for example, accounted for roughly half of a 2.9-million-person boom in the United States between 2005 and 2006. If projections are correct, whites will no longer be in the majority nationwide by 2042.

And yet many college campuses, particularly private colleges, don't reflect that diversity. According to Boston University enrollment statistics, African-Americans make up approximately 4 percent of this year's freshman class, with Hispanic students representing 9.3 percent. Nationwide, undergraduate enrollment rates at private and public four-year institutions

for those two groups are higher — 13.2 percent and 11.9 percent respectively, according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

“One of the issues we all face is that, sadly, the proportion of African-American and Hispanic students going to four-year institutions is much lower than for Caucasians and Asian-Americans,” says Laurie Pohl, BU vice president for enrollment and student affairs. “The pool is small, and we are all competing for the same students. Posse helps us identify students who might fly below the radar screen in our usual recruitment efforts.

“And the program is a proven winner,” she adds. “These students succeed. They graduate from college at greater than 90 percent. They become leaders on campus.”

In addition to efforts like Posse, the University employs two full-time minority recruitment specialists and has developed relationships with community-based organizations in urban areas. Pohl's team also recently created an Admissions Student Diversity Board, a group of student volunteers who help with outreach. She says that over the past five years, the number of African-American and Hispanic students applying to BU has risen faster than the increase in total applications. “We had a great year this year,” she says, “enrolling 133 African-American students, versus 101 last year, and 309 Hispanic students, versus 299.”

Posse founder and president Deborah Bial



POSSE SCHOLARS

(from left) Reuben Buchanan (CFA'12) with Copeland and Palacios at BU.

says her program is looking to do more than simply get minority students into college. "Posse is working to create a brand-new kind of network of professional leaders unlike anything this country has ever seen," says Bial, who received a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant" last year for her work with Posse. "It won't be a good-old-boys network. It won't be a network from the Greek system. It will be a network of powerful young people who were selected initially because of their leadership potential and who will be out there as lawyers and doctors and politicians, and who will better represent the demographics of this nation."

BEFORE EVER SETTING FOOT on Comm. Ave., the Posse students immersed themselves in college prep. They met weekly for eight months, most of the time in a corner room in Atlanta's Centennial Tower, overlooking Centennial Olympic Park, CNN headquarters, and tourists tilting on Segways or bouncing along in horse-drawn carriages.

The training covers the kinds of issues that have tripped up other highly talented students who enter college from low-performing urban high schools, such as time management, effective writing, and cross-cultural communication. While the academics are helpful, the group bonding is at the core of the program's philosophy and success. Bial first understood the importance of those ties twenty years ago, after a conversation with a college dropout from the inner city: he said he never would have quit school if he had "had his posse with him."

After one training session, which focused on conflict resolution, the students gathered on couches outside their workshop room, the froth of chatter punctuated by zingers and jokes. The chemistry was there; the bonds had clearly cemented. Schyler Cain (COM'12), then a senior at Parkview High School and the only white student in the group, says she didn't give the role of a posse much thought at first. "But now that I have one," she says, "the idea of going without them totally freaks me out."

TO REINFORCE THEIR BOND on campus, the group meets with Allen once a week. "Sometimes the meetings are about business and schoolwork," says Reuben Buchanan (CFA'12). "Other times, it's just a time for us to get together and reconnect, since we're all really busy."

Georgia native Allen has become a father figure of sorts. He has already placed a framed photo of the Atlanta dozen on his office desk, next to those of his own children. Allen describes his roots as humble. He attended Georgia State University and later taught at Emory University in Atlanta.

"You can't help but notice, as a student, how few role models look like you," says Allen, an African-American. "I went through an entire undergraduate program, forty classes, and an M.B.A. program, and never had a faculty member of color."

In February, Allen, along with BU administrators and Posse Atlanta staff, will lead a retreat for the students. He has asked each one to bring along three people, preferably with divergent opinions, to spend three days discussing the future of education in America. Already, the students are abuzz at the idea. "What I really love about the kids is they appreciate this incredible opportunity they've been given," Allen says, "and they're not going to let it go by the wayside and meander through the process."

JESSICA PALACIOS, OF MARIETTA, Georgia, has a text message saved on her phone from a fourteen-year-old friend of the family back home.

"The message says, 'I'm proud of you. I look up to you,'" says Palacios (CAS'12), sweeping her long brown hair from her glasses. "It gives me motivation. I don't want to ruin that. I remember I used to look up to a cousin and then she got pregnant, and I was like, oh, there's nothing to look up to anymore. In my family, there's this tendency that females get pregnant. I feel like I'm starting a new pattern. My younger sister's doing really well in school, and I don't want to let her down. I need to study harder."

Palacios is relaxing after class in the Howard Thurman Center. This semester, she is taking

anthropology, writing, archaeology, and math, and she's volunteering in the elementary schools in neighboring Chelsea, which has a large Hispanic population. "When I went there, I was like, whoa — I kinda feel like I'm at home." She says she's still looking for authentic Mexican food in Boston and — in early November — is dreading the New England winter she's heard so much about.

Palacios grew up in a small three-bedroom house in a dense Marietta neighborhood with her younger sister, brother, great uncle, and parents,

both Mexican immigrants. Her mom, Francisca, was pregnant with Jessica when she came to America to join her husband, who was here working construction.

WEB EXTRA
Watch videos of BU's Posse scholars talking about their lives, their challenges, and the difference they hope to make at www.bu.edu/bostonia.

Palacios and fellow BU Posse scholar Juan Galvan (CAS'12) attended Marietta's R. L. Osborne High School together. During their freshman year, Galvan says, "There was at least one fight every day. There were gang fights, there were race fights."

Things calmed down by their junior year, in part because Palacios and other student leaders began meeting monthly with parents and school staff, hoping to engage the largely immigrant and non-English-speaking population in their children's education. "Once you change the mentality of the parents, you see a difference in how their children react," Palacios says. "The parents didn't really know how things worked, didn't know what things like GPA meant."

But how do you package such efforts for an admissions committee? Even though she graduated with a 4.0 GPA, Palacios is reluctant to reveal her SAT scores. "I did horrible," she says, squirming in her chair. "But that shouldn't hinder me from being successful at college. I know I can do well. Posse looks past that."

Galvan, the son of a construction worker from Mexico, says he is the first in his extended family to graduate from high school, let alone go to college.

Does he feel pressure to represent, like Palacios?

"College is something I always planned to do, since I was little," Galvan says. "I've seen all my parents' hard work, what my father did to get over here, all the construction work. I'm not going to say, this is how I plan to live my life, and then go back on my word and become one of those idiots walking around with their gang members. I don't understand those people. Your parents worked really hard to get over here, and all the trouble they went through, and you're just going to let it go? It's an honor thing for me." ■

Reuben Buchanan /// Portrait of the artist he's becoming



REUBEN BUCHANAN is spending a lot of late nights in his CFA studio.

It didn't take long for Reuben Buchanan (CFA'12) to find a home at BU — specifically, Room 305, in the College of Fine Arts.

"I spend a lot of late nights here, painting and drawing," he says, adjusting his Atlanta Braves ball cap. "You paint for three hours in class, and then you find yourself painting three more hours on your own."

Buchanan, the son of a social worker and a middle school

art teacher, is soft-spoken, with a quiet confidence and an easy laugh. He attended the predominantly African-American Tri-Cities High School in East Point, Georgia, southwest of Atlanta, where he graduated with a 3.5 GPA and "pretty average" test scores. Math was a struggle, he says.

But throughout high school, Buchanan interned as a graphic artist at *VOX Teen Newspaper*, which is distributed in Atlanta-area schools. That, combined with his success in several art contests, caught the attention of the Posse Atlanta selection committee last year. His

most recent juried art win was in U.S. Representative John Lewis's 5th Congressional District Arts Competition. His mixed media self-portrait, called *My December*, hangs in the Capitol building in Washington, D.C.

Buchanan's third-floor studio at CFA is filled with easels, canvas-stuffed cubbies, and paint-splattered desks that would make Jackson Pollock feel at home.

"Already, I've seen BU improve my skills," he says, "Sometimes art teachers change your style, but I've found that BU takes whatever your style is and helps you make it better."