

# COLLEGE IS REAL

FALL 2020 NEWSLETTER



## ACCEPTANCE AND ATTENDANCE FOR CLASS OF 2020

The 78 CIR seniors in the class of 2020 worked diligently during the application season and applied to a variety of institutions, including some outstanding private universities, this past fall. Of the 78 seniors, 73 were accepted to at least one four-year university. This success is a testament of our students' perseverance, hard work, and their unwavering desire to be the first in their families to attend and graduate from college. We couldn't be more proud and happy for the CIR class of 2020. We wish them the best of luck on their new journey!

**93%** *4-YEAR  
ACCEPTANCE RATE*

**97%** *ATTENDING  
COLLEGE*

**74%** *ATTENDING  
A 4-YEAR*

# FUNDRAISING IN THE FACE OF A PANDEMIC AND SOCIAL DISTANCING

By Brad Blake, Founder & President

Almost all charitable organizations have had their normal event-driven fundraising efforts curtailed and rescheduled multiple times. Unfortunately, there is no clear vision as to when these types of events will be able to resume even at reduced capacity. CIR postponed events from the spring to the fall of 2020 and now to the spring of 2021. We are still working on a date, so stay tuned. We may elect to do a fun “virtual” fundraising event later in 2020, but we are not sure at this point whether it will produce the needed results relative to the production costs.

CIR missed a full cycle of event fundraising for 2020. Fortunately, many of our long-time, loyal donors responded to my email outreach a couple of months ago and donated more than \$200,000, and our foundation donors continued to stand by their commitments and in some cases even increased their past contribution amounts. We are humbled and extremely grateful.

We believe with some cost cutting and prudent financial management we will have enough cash to get through the 2020-21 school year until we hold our next event or make another direct email appeal in the spring of 2021.

We are proud of how the CIR team has continued to remotely support and counsel the students through these uncertain, disruptive, and stressful times. As you can imagine, in the Richmond community and in the Richmond schools all of the negatives and health risks are magnified. Our program and staff have been a lifeline to our students and in many cases their only consistent and dedicated link to the education system – both high school and college. These times have helped me realize even more deeply how vital CIR is to these kids and their families.



# MENTORING IN REMOTE TIMES

By David Millstein, Executive Director

A pillar of CIR's success has been matching our students with mentors who would nurture their aspirations and help instill the level of confidence necessary to persevere and attain their dream of college admission. While historically this was mostly done with in-person meetings we started a virtual mentoring program in 2018 that some of our mentors found to be more convenient. Now, as doing so remotely has become the preferable way for parties to meet, we are fully prepared and eager to add a much larger cohort of virtual mentors.



It would be an understatement to say that our students would benefit from mentoring now more than ever. While all of our daily lives have been affected, to varying degrees, the COVID-19 pandemic has been especially tough on students - - disrupting their school schedules, forcing them into distance learning, and separating them from their friends and teachers. The problems are even worse for those, such as our students, whose families are more at risk of health and financial stresses. As a consequence, students are worried, having difficulty understanding what is happening around them and what it means to the dreams they had for life after high school.

This is where you can help. It would be so helpful for students to build strong relationships with adults they can trust and who would help them navigate through these challenging times. And these relationships can continue when, hopefully very soon, we return to more normal times.

Becoming a virtual mentor will require as little as 1 to 2 hours a month as you meet remotely with your mentees at mutually agreeable times, typically twice a month. If you have an interest in learning more about our mentoring program, or if you want to get started right away, please contact our mentor coordinator, Destiney Norsouvanh, at [mentoring@collegeisreal.org](mailto:mentoring@collegeisreal.org), or visit our mentor website, [cirmmentor.weebly.com](http://cirmmentor.weebly.com).

## VIRTUAL MENTOR INTERVIEW

LAUREN SEAVER



TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOURSELF.

I work for Brad Blake as VP of Development at Blake Griggs Properties. I live in Lafayette and have a three-year old daughter and another baby on the way shortly. I graduated from Stanford (BA 09 and MBA 11).

WHAT LED YOU TO BECOME INVOLVED WITH CIR AS A VIRTUAL MENTOR?

I decided to become involved with CIR as a virtual mentor after attending CIR events and some company in-person mentoring sessions we had. I really wanted to find a way to give back to the community, in a personal and impactful way. I was very inspired by the work CIR is doing and the impact it is having on the lives of their students. I had previously only been aware of in-person mentoring opportunities and was concerned about the commute time given my other life commitments, so the virtual element also really appealed to me from a practical standpoint.

HOW HAS YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH VIRTUAL MENTORING BEEN LIKE?

My experience has been great! CIR did a great job of pairing me with two young women who I can really relate to and I think can make a material impact through mentoring. I have realized through this process how much my experience and guidance can actually benefit these students, even with a relatively small time commitment. We've gone from a regular monthly call to talking biweekly as we get closer to actually submitting applications. There's also the opportunity to help in other ways (ie, I've sent them books on colleges and helped with SAT prep class). All of these are things that I think will have a big impact on their success in the application process and have been very rewarding for me.

## STAFF UPDATES

### By Angie Arriaga, Senior Program Director

Brooke Cullen, who did an outstanding job as Program Director at De Anza High School, will no longer be part of the CIR team as she relocated to Ireland to pursue a graduate program. We are excited for her, but also very aware of the need to provide outstanding support to the students we are fortunate to serve at De Anza. Therefore, Destiney Norsouvanh, a CIR alum who has been working with us for six years as a program assistant and mentor coordinator while she attended college, will step in as Interim Program Director at DA this year to support our students, in particular seniors applying to college.

Destiney has worn many hats within our organization including her most recent role as Mentor Director. She worked remotely while pursuing her Bachelor's Degree in Sociology with a minor in Education Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. This spring, she graduated and has since joined the team full-time. With the unforeseen departure of our DA Program Director, Destiney quickly volunteered to step into the role to support, guide, and prepare our students. Next year, Destiney will transition into her intended role as College Success Director, and lead a new CIR initiative to address college persistence and to extend our support services to college students. Through her personal journey, Destiney developed a deep understanding of the challenges that many first generation college students of color face that make it difficult for them to earn their college degree. With this newfound passion, Destiney will lead our efforts to help college students navigate higher education and contribute to college success.

We are excited to welcome another CIR alum, Nancy Rojas, who joins the team as the new Assistant Program Director. A recent graduate from San Jose State University, Nancy has a degree in Sociology and a passion for her community. She will work closely with Destiney, particularly focused on the 9th-11th grade students with the goal of stepping into the Program Director role at DA by next school year. We are confident in their ability to provide quality programming and assure our commitment to the students we have the privilege to serve.

## STAFF INTERVIEWS

DESTINEY  
NORSOUVANH

### WHY IS COLLEGE PERSISTENCE IMPORTANT TO YOU?

As an individual who continued to struggle in college academically and socially, persistence is what allowed me to reach the finish line. College requires students, first generation students especially, to learn about themselves, recognize their potential, and continue to stay motivated. But the question is, how can they do that? I believe that in addition to college and career readiness, college persistence requires more attention and additional action. The key to college success is college retention combined with college persistence. Therefore, college persistence is important to me because it increases students' chances for degree completion and more opportunities.



### WHAT MOST EXCITES YOU ABOUT BECOMING COLLEGE SUCCESS DIRECTOR? WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH?

The College Success Director is a brand new role and I am honored that College Is Real has given me the opportunity to create something meaningful. I am most excited about adding to the current CIR program and beginning to reach students beyond high school. I hope by doing so we not only get students to college but increase degree completion. I also hope that through an increase of college support, students become more candid with their academic hardships and allow us to support them most effectively.

### HOW DO YOU PLAN TO SUPPORT COLLEGE STUDENTS?

I intend to support college students by developing and scaling a College Success Program that identifies and then addresses the needs of our alumni during their time in college. A few things I hope to include in the program are regular check-ins, campus specific resources, alumni mentoring, and community college transfer support and resources.

## STAFF INTERVIEWS

### NANCY ROJAS

#### WHY DID YOU JOIN THE CIR TEAM?

I joined the College Is Real team because I was part of the program while I was in high school and I loved how Angie provided help to us with the application process and provided resources that were so beneficial. She was very attentive and I felt important in her presence. I want to be able to give my kids that reassurance and for them to know that higher education is attainable no matter your background. I also wanted to give back and return to my Richmond community to provide the same help that was provided to me while I was in high school. An incredibly meaningful and effective way for me to do this is by joining the College Is Real team.



#### WHAT ARE YOU MOST EXCITED ABOUT IN ASSUMING YOUR ROLE?

The thing I am most excited about my position is to be able to interact with the kids and let them get to know me. This is critical, in order for me to get them to open up and allow me to help them through this journey. I am also excited that I will be working with kids who come from the same background as I do (low income, underrepresented, and first generation). I believe that being a CIR alum and from Richmond will allow me to connect with the students and provide the best assistance I can because I am already so knowledgeable about the organization and what it can accomplish.

#### WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH AS PART OF THE TEAM?

I hope to provide assistance to all the kids who are in the CIR program and remind them that I am here to help no matter the circumstances. I want them to know that I will help them get into college and that the end goal is not just to attend college, but to gain life experience and progress towards a meaningful career of their choice.

# THANK YOU!

TO OUR BOARD, STAFF & DONORS

## BOARD MEMBERS

Brad Blake (Founder & President), Greg Chabolla, David Millstein, Renton Squires, Susan Lopera Overton, Robert Telles, Nick Sclavos, Pascal Yammine, Jennifer Hernandez, Eric Tuckness

## STAFF

David Millstein, *Volunteer Executive Director*  
Angelica Arriaga, *Senior Program Director*  
Destiney Norsouvanh, *College Success Director*  
Fabian Martinez, *Program Director*  
Nancy Rojas, *Assistant Program Director*

## DONOR TESTIMONIALS

"I was introduced to College Is Real by a friend of mine, he was impressed with the great work they were doing in helping kids in the Richmond public high schools prepare for and get into college. I met with Brad Blake and David Millstein and was extremely impressed with the organization, their mission, and the large percentage (2019-93%) of kids in their program being accepted into and attending college (including the UC system and some top private universities). Maybe even more impressive is that the vast majority of the money raised by CIR goes directly to support the mission of getting kids into college and not to administrative overhead."

Dave Gemmer  
Gemmer Family Fund  
CIR donor since 2017



## STAY CONNECTED

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@COLLEGEISREAL



## DONOR TESTIMONIALS

"I've believed in Brad Blake since meeting him in college, and I've believed in College Is Real since my first exposure to his vision 15 years ago. Not all schools or families have the knowledge and resources to help youth find the best path to higher education and maximize their considerable talents, energy, and potential. CIR helps fill this void in Richmond. I have enjoyed watching College Is Real grow from this core vision to be a highly impactful organization, sending hundreds of young adults on to college and more rewarding lives. College Is Real is an impactful, leveraged investment in changing lives."

Pete Higgins  
Higgins Family Foundation  
CIR donor since 2018

"When the Ardian Foundation decided to expand the groups it supports in the US, College Is Real was a natural fit for us. The Foundation's mission is to support students globally and help them realize their potential, which is exactly what CIR achieves. I was first introduced to CIR through my father, who ran Richmond High's football program. He saw the impact CIR had on the lives of his student-athletes and encouraged us to get involved. From an organizational standpoint, what has been impressive is how efficiently the group is run and how transparent they are with their budget and how it is deployed. CIR thoughtfully manages how each dollar is spent on the best programming and resources available for their students. Beyond our donation, it was important that we were able to engage with the students as well. I have been lucky enough to directly mentor four young women and it was through this amazing experience that I was really able to see just how impactful CIR can be. It's not just about SAT tutoring or help with a college essay – it is about successfully and fully transitioning these bright and energetic students to "college-life", which can be daunting. I've now seen first-hand just how important and essential CIR is and we plan on continuing and deepening our relationship!"

Erin Odisio Jones  
Ardian Foundation  
CIR donor since 2017

## HOW TO DONATE TO CIR

College Is Real, Inc. is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization with **Tax ID: 20-8651702**. All donations are tax deductible. If you are interested in making a donation, please do so by going to the CIR website ([collegeisreal.org](http://collegeisreal.org)) or make a check out to "College Is Real" and mail it to:

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