



## **FUTURE IS BRIGHT FOR KC SCHOLARS PROGRAM AT ITS FIVE-YEAR MARK**

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“There’s so much potential ahead. We’re just getting started.”



*KC Scholars celebrating 5 years this month, assisting area students achieve their dreams with their scholarship program. Liz Espino-Reynoso said she may have not gotten her college degree without the financial help from the KC Scholars scholarship program.*

**BY JOE ARCE AND COREY CRABLE**

**AN IN-DEPTH REPORT**

Five years ago, one organization was founded to help learners achieve their dream of going to college and earning a post-secondary degree. Now, five years later, KC Scholars is a mainstay among organizations in the metro area dedicated to bettering the lives of those learners and giving them the tools required to succeed.

No one knows the life-changing power of earning a college degree better than KC Scholars' President and CEO, Dr. Beth Tankersley-Bankhead, herself a first-generation college student who earned her doctoral degree in her late 40s and who has worked in post-secondary education for her entire adult career.

Tankersley-Bankhead says students have a variety of reasons why they might see college as an experience for others, but not for themselves.

"A lot of students might not see college as an opportunity. Maybe they see it as too costly, maybe they're the first in their family to go to college, maybe they don't have the support to apply for college. That whole process is pretty daunting," she says. "Young people might say, 'I can't do that,' when, in fact, they absolutely can. We wanted to provide more opportunities and access for populations who have been historically underrepresented in higher education. There was a need. We want every single eligible individual to apply for a scholarship and have the support they need to apply."

Hispanics are just one of those populations that have been underrepresented in college classrooms that's why KC Scholars reaches out to that population specifically.

The program reaches over into both sides of the state line, serving Johnson and Wyandotte counties on the Kansas side, and Cass, Clay, Jackson and Platte counties in Missouri. Those applying for the scholarships it sponsors must be in ninth grade or 11th grade, while separate scholarships are offered to adult learners at least 24 years of age who have graduated from high school and entered the workforce. Students in public, private, and charter schools are welcome to apply, as are students who are home-schooled.

Tankersley-Bankhead says that she wants KC Scholars to afford collegiate opportunities for anyone who wants to pursue post-secondary education.

"This means so much to me personally. My entire career has been spent in higher education. I am the first in my family to go to college. It changed my entire life, it provided me opportunities to meet others, to learn about the world," she says. "My life would have been very different if I hadn't been able to go to college. I firmly believe everyone who wants to, should be supported to do so."

Liz Espino-Reynoso, a 2007 graduate of Shawnee Mission South High School in Johnson County, is just one of hundreds of students whose life has been changed by being named a KC Scholars scholarship recipient. Originally from Mexico, Espino-Reynoso watched her older sister try to pursue her dream of college but couldn't continue because of difficulties. In her school district, Espino-Reynoso explains, most families expect their children to attend a four-year college.

"Being in a good area in Kansas, it was expected that after high school, you would go straight to college," she says. "On my end, it was at the end of my senior year when I was talking to four-year colleges. I thought maybe it wasn't going to be possible to go due to my finances. I was undocumented, so I had very few opportunities to get financing to go to college. ... My mom was just working for us to survive, period."

However, Espino-Reynoso was determined to live the dream her sister had to abandon.

"I had always known I was really smart. I got good grades, I had a lot of potential, and I shouldn't waste that potential," she says. "My sister had to give up on her dream, so it was up to me."

In 2012, then-President Barack Obama enacted Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, a piece of legislation that allowed Espino-Reynoso to legally stay in the U.S. on a work visa. Over the next few years, she considered examining scholarships that would aid her in attending college.

"I had stepped away from my education for a while and I had to decide where I was going to go from here," Espino-Reynoso recalls. "I decided to go for my bachelor's degree. One of my coworkers mentioned the KC Scholars scholarship. The deadline was tomorrow, and at work, I got my application going." To her delight, Espino-Reynoso was awarded a scholarship. She attended the University of Kansas and, for the next few years, kept her eyes focused on the degree that, with plenty of hard work, was just within reach. She would eventually graduate with her bachelor's degree in business administration with a minor in public administration.

She remembers the graduation ceremony itself vividly.

"I was nervous, I was excited. When I was walking toward the stadium where the graduation ceremony was going to be, I was walking alongside all of these tall white boys. It cracked me up it was a metaphor for getting passed up by all these people but knowing I was going to get there," Espino-Reynoso says. "The very next day, we had a graduation party and it was super emotional for me. Everyone told me how proud they were of me, and I had no idea how much this meant to my cousins, my friends. One told me, 'Now my daughter has someone to look up to.'"

Stories like Espino-Reynoso's are what makes the work of those behind the scenes at KC Scholars so fulfilling, Tankersley-Bankhead says.

"(Adult learners) thought their dream of earning a post-secondary degree was over. They didn't know they would have another opportunity and now they do, and they're doing so well," she says. "They're enrolling, continuing, completing, and we have more than 100 adults who have completed their degree. ... They want to be role models for their children, their grandchildren, others in their family. So, it's a very special program."

The acts of enrolling in college and continuing their degree have a ripple effect in the lives of other adult learners, many of whom see their own family members follow suit and go back to school, according to Tankersley-Bankhead.

"The thing that stands out most is there's a son or daughter who gets into the program. They tell their parent, 'You can do it, too. You can go back to college,'" she says. "They get into the program and do so great. It's the ninth- and 11th-graders encouraging their parents." Tankersley-Bankhead says that 448 scholarship recipients have at least another family member participating in KC Scholars, including parents and grandparents.

Those who complete their degree end up continuing their hard work by contributing to the community.

"Our students live here, they're from here, they want to give back. They're so talented," Tankersley-Bankhead says. "They're the next generation of our leaders. It's a joy."

The Kansas City metro area has shown its support of these learners with donations to KC Scholars. One hundred percent of monies donated to the program go toward student scholarships.

"The future is so bright. There's so much potential ahead. We're just getting started," Tankersley-Bankhead says. "We're going to connect our scholars to our local workforce. They're going to be heads of companies. They're going to be heads of organizations."

Tankersley-Bankhead says the monetary contributions of others are central to the program's continued success.

"There's still a need to be met. The program will grow. We have a goal of 15,000 scholars by 2027. We have a great start, but we really have just started," she says. "We ask the community to support KC Scholars. The program matters and it does what it's designed to do. We have five years of data to support that. So, we're asking the community to support this program financially."

Tankersley-Bankhead says she is grateful for the people at KC Scholars who help make dreams come true for learners of all ages.

"In particular, we have to mention the board, the staff, and we also have to mention the high schools. They're so proud of their students," she says. "Donors, community volunteer reviewers, they're all so glad the program is making an impact, and they're so happy for our scholars."

Espino-Reynoso says she, too, is thankful for the program and the people behind it.

"I'd like them to know they are investing in people's dreams and in their future, and that investment is going to pay back twofold, threefold. The people going for this scholarship are people who have dreams who just need that extra little push," Espino-Reynoso says. "KC Scholars is a commitment that we shouldn't be afraid of. If you have that desire for your life, do it. They have great resources to help people get back into school. You're not going to be alone during this process. It's going to be a commitment, but it's so worth it in the end."

***For more information, to apply for a scholarship or to make a monetary donation, visit [www.kcscholars.org](http://www.kcscholars.org).***