

Embracing higher



education

Jay "B.J." Spann gets a shot at college, thanks in part to an MU Extension program in St. Louis.

Story by Sarah Garber
Photos by Nicholas Benner

You've seen it in the movies: A motivated, young individual — usually a teacher — shows up at an inner city high school. Said teacher is appalled by the violent, volatile world in which the smart but struggling students live. With determination, support and creative education, the teacher helps students graduate from high school and attend college. The film's closing scene is optimistic.

You've seen it in the news: Urban high schools in the United States face low student attendance and graduation rates. Seventeen of the nation's 50 largest cities have graduation rates of less than 50 percent, according to a 2008 America's Promise Alliance report. The news stories end with state and city officials planning their next step, and students' futures uncertain.

This is the real thing: MU freshman Jay "B.J." Spann of St. Louis attended high school at Gateway Institute of Technology — a magnet school in the St. Louis public school district. He graduated May 27, 2008, and moved into College Avenue Hall one week later as part of MU's Trial Admission Program. As it turns out, real life blends two story lines: College access doesn't come easy, but having help improves the odds. Spann's future now looks brighter.

Jay "B.J." Spann, front, of St. Louis, hugs Nicolya Johnson, a member of the MU Extension 4-H Youth Development Program — also known as STL Educators. The program's students and staff gather in front of the St. Louis City West End Community Center, the program's home base.



A serious son

Spann's grandmother, Ann Usher, sums up Spann's youth with pride: "We never had any problem with him," she says. "He's so sincere and positive. I didn't have to worry about him.

"And he has always been so serious about his education," says Usher of St. Louis. "He's not going through the paces. He says, 'I want to better my life,' and he has the motivation and determination to do it."

But that's not to say that circumstances were ideal. Spann's mother, Sarah McElroy, had a brain aneurysm in 1995. The resulting damage caused some long-term effects. "I don't remember much about the kids growing up," McElroy says.

At the time of the aneurysm, Spann was 6 years old. His grandparents cared for him and his older brother while McElroy recovered. "I was young," he says, "so it's not like

I knew what was going on." Now, he says he and his mother are very close. "She's a hard worker and a positive thinker," he says. "She's very motivated to succeed."

The situation fostered close family ties all around, and Spann often accompanied his brother to after-school activities. Although he didn't know it at the time, one group activity in particular — an MU Extension after-school program — would affect him for the rest of his life. "It's like my second home," Spann says. "We're a family. We support each other."

Home away from home

Housed in a city-owned building in need of repair, the basement of 724 Union Blvd., known as the St. Louis City West End Community Center, has a reputation among inner city youth. But it's not the ghost stories or the occasional burglaries that have

them talking. It's the MU Extension 4-H Youth Development Program.

At about 3 p.m. almost every weekday, 15 middle school and high school students leave class and make their way to the West End Center. Once there, they discuss the day's news as it blares on the television. A few play pool on a donated pool table, and others challenge the computer to a game of chess. Everyone is reminded — repeatedly — to do their homework.

This is not a stereotypical 4-H program — there are no farm animals, no barns and no corn. Partnered with 106 land-grant universities across the U.S., including MU, 4-H is a youth development and research program with considerable reach. Although it has historically focused on agriculture and animal husbandry in rural areas, a new breed of 4-H focuses on urban youth development.

"Whether rural or urban, kids are fac-

BELOW: Spann, center, and other members of STL Educators congregate after school in the basement of the St. Louis City West End Community Center for college prep, leadership and community service activities, as well as a little down time.

RIGHT: Kelli Lowe, staff member for STL Educators, congratulates Spann on his graduation from Gateway Institute of Technology high school on May 27, 2008.



ing the same kinds of issues," says Jody Squires, BGS '94, MU Extension urban youth specialist and city program director for the St. Louis program. She's referring to the downward trend in high school graduation rates and the barriers some youth face to attending college.

She and her staff of three — Nicolya Johnson, Kelli Lowe and Charles Lowe — help equip middle school and high school students from the St. Louis public school district with the values and leadership skills necessary to graduate from high school and attend college. Most of the time, they have help. Previous participants often serve as mentors for students currently in the program (see sidebar on Page 23).

Spann has been part of the program for the last nine years. "This is the type of program that helps you define yourself," he says. "Coming here has kept me off

the streets and kept me from doing bad things."

The learning curve

The program — called STL Educators — teaches students the importance of managing their finances, communicating and collaborating with others, and giving back to the community. The group also visits local colleges and takes other field trips. Each student has to maintain a 3.0 grade point average, fulfill responsibilities at home as designated by a parent, participate in community service activities and help raise money for the trips.

"We try to give them a college experience," Charles says. "We want them to know what it's going to be like when they have to juggle all these things on their own."

"Being a part of the program was a reality check," Spann says. To graduate, "I learned I

had to focus on my grades. I wasn't going to let those slip."

Large cities face low graduation rates, and the St. Louis public school district is no exception. "We talk about college in every program we have," Squires says. "But it's also very important for us to emphasize high school graduation."

"We've known for a long time that there are big gaps in graduation rates," says Jason Grissom, an education policy expert and assistant professor in MU's Harry S Truman School of Public Affairs. "This is a really complex problem, and no single approach will fix it. It has to be a comprehensive approach."

But in a school district facing its own challenges, it isn't likely that such an approach will be developed any time soon. In March 2007, the district lost its state accreditation — a serious blow to its

BELOW: As part of the STL Educators curriculum, participants visit Missouri colleges. During a trip to Mizzou, Spann, center, and other members of the group attended the Black and Gold game on April 19, 2008.



reputation. In addition to low achievement, Grissom says, the St. Louis public school district faces leadership and administrative issues that make it difficult for it to rebound.

For graduating students, the district's loss of accreditation isn't likely to affect their college admissions, Grissom says. But standardized test preparation such as for the ACT — required for most college admissions — can be a barrier to acceptance to a four-year institution for some students. In 2007, students at Gateway Technical Institute scored an average of 17.4 on the test. The average ACT score for all students enrolled at MU is 25.5.

Trial and admission

Spann's ACT score combined with his class ranking made him eligible for MU's Trial Admission Program. Students in the program take two college courses from June 9 to Aug. 1. Successful students — Spann among them — then start regular course work in the fall.

The transition to college life was fast, Spann says. "I had to adjust to that, but now I know what to expect." He is enrolled as an architectural studies major in the College of Human Environmental Sciences and lives in Campus Lodge Apartments.

All of the students who have participated in the STL Educators 4-H Youth Development program over the past eight years have graduated from high school and gone on to college — Spann is the 23rd. He's determined not to be the last. "I'll stay involved in the program — of course I will," he says. "It helped me, and I want it to help others too." ■



RIGHT: After helping her son move into student housing Aug. 20, 2008, Spann's mother, Sarah McElroy, gives him an affectionate tweak on the nose before returning home to St. Louis.

BELOW RIGHT: McElroy, the STL Educators mentors and students, and Spann gather for a celebratory send-off dinner as Spann and the other seniors prepare for their transition into college. At the dinner, Spann becomes emotional after receiving the classic Dr. Seuss book *Oh, the Places You'll Go* from his mentors.



FAR RIGHT: By October, Spann has settled into life on campus. He walks across Lowry Mall mid-day Tuesdays and Thursdays.



What goes around comes around

Freshman Jay “B.J.” Spann isn’t the first student from STL Educators — the MU Extension 4-H Youth Development program in St. Louis — to make MU his higher education institution of choice. He follows in the footsteps of mentors Eric Durell Thomas, left, and Leon Franks, both of St. Louis.

Like Spann but four years earlier, Thomas and Franks graduated from Gateway Institute of Technology. Now, they’re on track to graduate from MU with bachelors’ degrees in electrical engineering, and they credit their successes to the 4-H Youth Development program.

As a group leader in the program, Thomas learned how to prioritize tasks and manage his time — skills that paid off when he got to college. “High school did not prepare me at all for college,” he says. “I had to use my time management skills to choose what I needed to work on.”

Franks says that visiting schools helped him decide to apply in the first place. “I didn’t actually want to go to college at first,” he says. “But after seeing what it was like, I chose college.”

Thomas and Franks continue to participate in the program. They visit the West End Center during breaks; act as mentors to students who have questions, need help or just want to talk; and offer up their home (they’re roommates) when the students come to visit.

“I want to make sure that all the kids in the program get the same experience I got,” Thomas says. “I don’t want to be one of those people who forgets where they come from.”

Both Thomas and Franks plan to pursue master’s degrees. “Not everyone makes it in college,” Thomas says. “But everyone should try.”

