

Blazing a trail

By Kim Burgess / Journal Staff Writer

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Health Leadership High School senior Carolyn Baca puts on a graduation cap after being awarded a Hope Scholarship, a full-ride scholarship to Blackburn College in Carlinville, Ill., on Tuesday. (Marla Brose/Albuquerque Journal)

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When Carolyn Baca, 18, was asked to take a photo that represents her dreams, she captured an image of the University of New Mexico Hospital, where she hopes to one day work as a cardiothoracic surgeon.

“A lot of the communities here in New Mexico do not get good health care, so I want to be a person who helps these families,” she said, standing in front of a poster-sized print of her photo Tuesday during the Pictures of Hope exhibit at Health Leadership High School.

Baca just made a big step toward that goal, winning a \$100,000 full ride to Blackburn College in Carlinville, Ill., about 60 miles from St. Louis.

She would be the first in her family to obtain a bachelor’s degree.

On Tuesday, Blackburn College President John Comerford visited Health Leadership High to present Baca with the Hope Scholarship, which covers tuition, room and board for four years.



Health Leadership High School students, including Jesse Martinez, bottom left, Kiara Williams, bottom center, and Zach Goesch, bottom right, hold their photographs from Pictures of Hope, a program that enables students to capture visions of their hopes and dreams through photography. (Marla Brose/Albuquerque Journal)

The award is open to participants in Pictures of Hope, a program launched by Detroit-based photojournalist Linda Solomon to give homeless and low-income kids a chance to learn about photography and work with volunteer mentors from the community.

This year, Blackburn will award five Hope Scholarships across the country.

“It will open doors for me,” Baca said. “I won’t have to take out loans.”

The teen admitted she is a bit nervous about moving a thousand miles from home to navigate college life, but also excited.

Comerford said Blackburn College tries to award the Hope Scholarship to a student who can flourish in a new environment.

Baca is a good fit for the small liberal arts school, he said.

“She will come and do well,” Comerford said. “She will make a lot of friends.”

Health Leadership High School executive director Blanca Lopez compared Baca to a conquistador blazing a trail for other New Mexico teens.

This year, the charter school near the Albuquerque International Sunport will graduate its first class and Baca is the only student with a scholarship to an out-of-state college.

Part of the Leadership High School Network – a group of Albuquerque charter schools focused on career preparation in a variety of areas – Health Leadership High School was chartered by the state in 2012.

“Sometimes kids don’t see a lot of choices and opportunities for them,” Lopez said. “For one student to do this, it will help the whole student body. It will widen their outlook.”



Health Leadership High School senior Carolyn Baca, second from left, is congratulated by her mentor, Dr. Valerie Romero-Leggott, left, of the UNM Health Sciences Center, after she was awarded a Hope Scholarship, a full-ride scholarship to Blackburn College in Carlinville, Ill., on Tuesday. Baca's mother, Maria Baca, hugs Blackburn College President John Comerford, who presented Baca, an aspiring cardiothoracic surgeon, with the scholarship. (Marla Brose/Albuquerque Journal)

Baca, described by family and teachers as motivated, hard-working and self-assured, already has helped inspire her younger sister, Katey, 13. The eighth-grader wants to become a lawyer, according to mom Maria Baca.

"I will have a doctor and a lawyer," she said. "I am very proud. They want to study hard."

For Solomon, Pictures of Hope is all about motivating kids to make their dreams concrete.

Since 2005, the award-winning photojournalist has brought the program to more than 40 cities – handing out hundreds of free donated digital cameras so students can spend a day with a mentor taking photos of their dreams. The students keep the cameras, and their artwork with messages are displayed during a special exhibit.

Albuquerque is a favorite site for Solomon. So when she received a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, she decided to come back to the Duke City for the fourth time.

The 15 students in the Health Leadership High School program shared photos that showed a wide range of ambitions: Kiara Williams dreams of becoming a social worker; Jesse Martinez wants to travel the world; Mavel Valdez would love to buy her parents a beautiful home.

Solomon plans to bring Pictures of Hope to Health Leadership High School again next year.

"It is an honor to be here and share dreams like this," she said. "Each dream is so meaningful."

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