FIRST PERSON DOCUMENTARY PROJECT
Coverage of The College Ambassadors Project
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# I'round about

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# Village People

## Kids ask their communities to help them attend college.

"Nobody expected me to be anything," says Michael Magobet.

It's a harsh realization for an 18-year-old. And for Magobet, at no place was the evidence clearer than at Edison High School.

"It didn't seem like the teachers were ... " he says, pausing for the right words. "We weren't really learning in there. A lot of stuff I learned in high school, I learned in elementary school."

Eventually he stopped attending.

"If they're already expecting low standards, that's what we're going to do," he says of his educational experience. "If you can get a D and pass, you're not going to fight for an A. If they set standards higher, students would be more prepared for college. But they weren't preparing us for anything."

Over the summer, through First Person's College Ambassador Project, Magobet and eight other North Philadelphia high school students researched what black and Latino males needed to make it to college. Their concept was it takes a village to send them there.

Through their research, which included reports, statistical data and surveys, they identified five factors key to college readiness: education and academic support, competent organizations and programs, mentoring and social support, neighborhood leadership and financial assistance.

In their North Philadelphia village, they found high schools with weak academic programs, limited tutoring and no information on college. They found city-funded after-school programs that operated as lazy hangouts. They found a district in which about half of the students graduate in four years, and neighborhood schools where hardly any of the 11th-graders can read or perform math at grade level.

They found that 68 percent of black families in their village live below the poverty line. They found few bachelor's degrees. They found communities where drugs and violence flourish. They found that more than half of the people killed in Philadelphia this year were black men, and that 61 of them were under 21.

They found that too many of their peers were discouraged and angry, standing on corners, drinking, smoking weed and selling drugs.

They found that they weren't being prepared for college. In fact, they were being set up to fail.

As a result, their grade for their North Philadelphia village was a C-.

"The grade should be an F," says Magobet. "We have to fight our village to even get to college."

The project's educational director Eric Grimes agrees.

"A lot of work is done around anti-violence or anti-whatever," Grimes says, "but there isn't a lot of work around educational opportunities for young black men. No one wants to address the systematic challenges of racism and classism these brothers face when they try to figure out how to survive in America."

Grimes tells how at one college, while conducting surveys for the project, someone called campus police on the students—another harsh realization of the perception that young black men don't belong on a college campus.

"My goal is for them to say, 'I deserve better,' and teach them how to fight for better," says Grimes. "Frederick Douglass said power concedes nothing without demand, and that's what we're trying to get these young people to see."

For months Magobet says he sat around the house, ran the streets and got into trouble.

His absence from school went virtually unnoticed.

"This is what I've been dealing with my whole life, so I'm kinda immune to it," he says of the ubiquity of low expectations. "We're a product of our environment."

**Magobet grew** up in North Philadelphia, the second youngest of his mother's six children.

He says his mother leaves the house around 6 a.m. to work in a pharmaceutical factory, and re turns home around 6 p.m., whi gives her a few hours before she has to be in bed to start all ove again.

"There's not a lot of time to tal her," he says. "I see her on the we ends, but she's a great mom. She struggling to provide for all of u

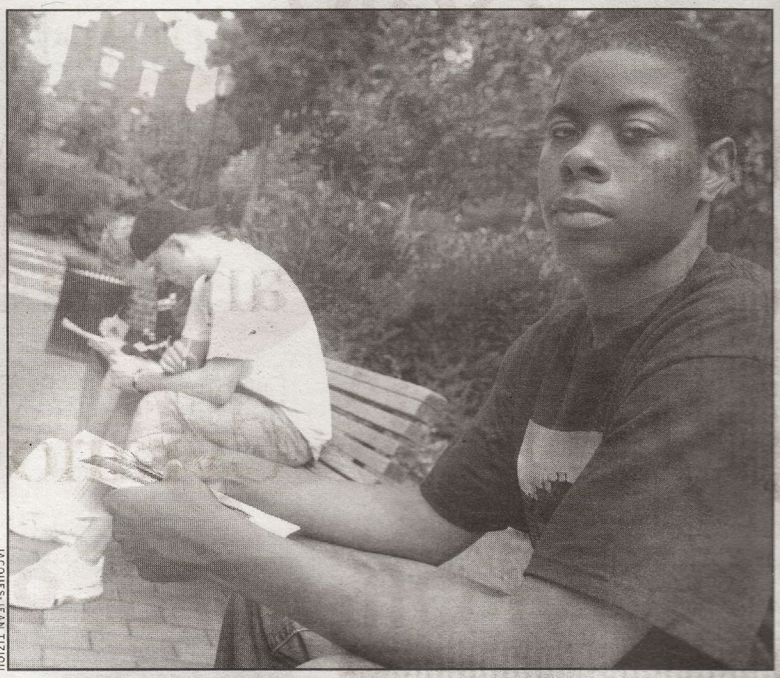
He talked to his father a coupl years ago. "It was like, 'Hi and b he says of the conversation. "He' not really a father."

No one in Magobet's family ev went to college, but while runni the streets, he says, "I finally rea ized I needed school to get some where in life."

In their report card, the studer recommend their village provide challenging, competitive educati that the adults in their lives raise their expectations of them, that college students mentor them on regular basis, and that youth-orie organizations allow students to mon their progress.

For now, Magobet is back in sch at an alternative year-round prog called Fairhill Community, where students can graduate in two year He describes the school as having high standards and zero tolerance After he graduates, he wants to g college, and major in business.

"All of us want to go to college," Magobet says of the college amba sadors. "But we don't know if we' have the chance." ■



JACQUES-JEAN TIZIOU

**Self-propelled:** Michael Magobet is determined to exceed society's expectations of him.

### Just the Facts

» **The issue:** The North Philadelphia college ambassadors release their first report on their neighborhood's ability to prepare them for college.

» **The question:** Why don't more of their peers go to college?

» **What's next:** The college ambassadors will make an outreach appearance Sept. 22. Go to www.firstpersondocumentary.org for details.