

# Spotlight on Student Success

**M**ahogany, a naturally poised, well-spoken senior at Charlotte-Mecklenburg's South Mecklenburg High School immediately becomes a candid, 17-year-old girl when she talks about first discovering Communities In Schools: "I love it!"

It's easy to see why Mahogany – born in prison to a single mother struggling with a drug addiction, and homeless by age 13 – is so passionate about the organization that has played such a major role in her life. She said, "Being at Communities In Schools is like having another parent to help you out."

Mahogany was first introduced to Communities In Schools (CIS) in the 8th grade when CIS helped provide her needed reading glasses. But when her mother relapsed back into addiction, Mahogany realized she needed to take proactive action to break the cycle. "I got to the point where I thought, I know I need to be something in life to get out of the problem. So I got the courage and realized it's time to focus on myself and not focus on my mom and her addiction."

Having spent her younger years walking to school alone on the path her mother previously cautioned her as dangerous, and attending six different Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools, she gradually built up the courage to take control of her own life. At school she met her CIS Site Coordinator, Michelle Lair, who was immediately impressed with Mahogany's initiative.



Mahogany and Michelle Lair. Photo by May Johnston.

Ms. Lair quickly connected with Mahogany and they gradually developed "a relationship that transcends the typical student-counselor relationship." Their connection is palpable. "I'm in her office every day," Mahogany explained, and Ms. Lair quickly added – "Literally!" They both laughed.

"I think CIS and Ms. Lair are like a home outside of home, a family outside of my family," Mahogany said, "It's a support system. It's comforting knowing that there are other people who have had the same problems I have, and have achieved success."

See other success stories like Mahogany's by checking out CISNC's year-long 2011 "Overcoming Obstacles: CIS Success Stories" video series – short-form multimedia pieces capturing different success stories from within the North Carolina network – viewable at [www.cisnc.org/media/video-stories](http://www.cisnc.org/media/video-stories).

It is clear that Ms. Lair has helped Mahogany discover that path. To her, the concept is simple: "CIS is about giving support to students who can very easily be overlooked, and because of being overlooked, have less chance of being successful. But with just one look and a helping hand, they can have the support that they need to be successful."

Mahogany is well on her way to becoming one of those lifelong

success stories. Since first introduced to CIS, she has participated in numerous CIS activities, including extensive college-prep workshops and courses, campus tours, job shadowing, the Mayor's Youth Employment Program and a speaking competition this spring. Ms. Lair has "watched her come out of her quiet shell and become a young lady." "For her to mature in her self-confidence and communications skills, to become comfortable interacting with adults and to become even more comfortable with herself has helped a lot," she added.

Mahogany has been accepted at Livingstone College and is also considering three other options for undergraduate coursework. She envisions herself as a lawyer and plans to start her own advocacy organization someday to reach out to students and families who have had similar experiences to her own. In more ways than one, it sounds like she's ready:

"A lot of people overlook today's youth. Then there are gangs, drugs and violence. CIS is a program that can get a lot of students outside of bad influences and into another area. It's important because my generation really is the future, and I think that we need to come together as a whole to help others, and try to make a better world."

*This article was reprinted in part with the kind permission of Jamie Urbanowicz, Citizen Paine.*

## Corporate Sponsor Spotlight: IBM

**R**ecognized for its sound business practices and financial transparency, Communities In Schools of North Carolina (CISNC) continues to attract the support of a diverse group of partners, even during tough economic times. Among its most ardent supporters is IBM.

IBM has been a long-standing partner with CISNC for more than 20 years. The company was a founding partner and has contributed leadership as well as goods and services to both the state and local programs.

"As one of the leading partners in education in North Carolina, IBM plays a critical role and has helped us achieve our increasing graduation rates," stated CISNC President and CEO Linda Harrill.

Tina Wilson, Manager of Corporate Citizenship and Corporate Affairs for IBM and CISNC Board Member, emphasized that it is CISNC's reliability that motivates their partnership. "IBM could choose to invest our time, talent and resources in many different organizations," she explains. "The main reason IBM has invested and partnered with CISNC is because of their success rate. Communities In Schools is the number-one nonprofit that helps our youth succeed in school with on-time graduation, and they're backed by a lot of research that shows this success."

As part of their partnership, IBM provided a \$260,000 grant that allowed CISNC and the N.C. Partnership for Children (NCPC) to provide 100 Little Tikes Young Explorer™ computer centers to early childhood development programs across the state. The computer centers are part of IBM's KidSmart™ Early Learning Program, a global early-learning technology initiative to



support the early childhood education of children internationally.

"IBM partnered with CISNC and NCPC to strategically place these Young Explorer computers in the schools and preschools where they could benefit the children who needed them the most in North Carolina," said Wilson. "The Young Explorer computers are equipped with award-winning educational software in English and Spanish that helps children learn about and explore concepts in math, science and language at a very early age in a fun and engaging way."

In recent years, IBM has also partnered with CISNC to introduce one of IBM's key literacy initiatives, voice-recognition software called "Reading Companion," in counties served by CIS to enhance the literacy skills of students and parents struggling with basic reading and reading comprehension. "We realize that in order to help the student, we must also be willing to support parents and/or other significant adults in the students' lives," said Harrill.

Another innovative program used by many CISNC affiliates is an e-mentoring program created by IBM called "MentorPlace." IBM MentorPlace is an online mentoring program that links the knowledge, dedication and enthusiasm of teachers and students with the talent, skills and volunteering spirit of IBM employees. This mentoring occurs online, so children who need a mentor are able to have one, no matter how far away they live from each other.

Most recently, IBM graciously provided Communities In Schools grant funding to enhance organizational capacity and learning. Specifically, CISNC received hands-on IBM training on social media best practices to help expand and enhance its social media presence and outreach, while CIS of Wake County was guided in strategic planning and project management.

"All of these grants are truly a reflection of IBM's commitment to the education of North Carolina's students and of the power of collaboration," said Harrill. "For students to achieve, they need the support of the entire community. For the past 23 years, CISNC has been helping North Carolina school districts surround students with a community of support, empowering them to stay in school and achieve in life. Partnerships with corporations such as IBM are a key part of how we are achieving positive outcomes for North Carolina's at-risk kids. IBM's support over the years has been tremendous."

For this long-time and deep commitment to education, Communities In Schools presented IBM with the 2008 "H. Glenn Williams Power of One Award" for excellence in supporting youth and education in North Carolina.

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