

In spring 2008, a group of high-school students stepped up to podiums around the city of Pittsburgh. As they accepted diplomas from our public schools, the economic recession was just settling in for what many of us feared would be a long, unwelcome stay.

The young adults, clad in their caps and gowns, knew full well that they were launching into a world where unemployment and tuition costs were both on the rise. It's hard to tell what must have looked more daunting from their perspective: finding enough money for college or hunting for a job with just a high-school diploma in hand.

But some of them — those who kept their GPAs high enough and their attendance records clean enough — left school that day knowing they had a unique, meaningful advantage.

They were the first beneficiaries of a wildly ambitious program known as The Pittsburgh Promise.

Promises kept.

IN A CITY WHERE HIGHER EDUCATION REIGNS SUPREME, ENROLLING IN A GREAT COLLEGE WAS SIMPLY A DREAM FOR SOME LOCAL HIGH-SCHOOLERS — UNTIL THE PITTSBURGH PROMISE CAME ALONG. HERE'S THE STORY OF THE PROMISE'S FIRST GRADUATING CLASS.

**BY MELISSA RAYWORTH
PHOTOS BY MARTHA RIAL**

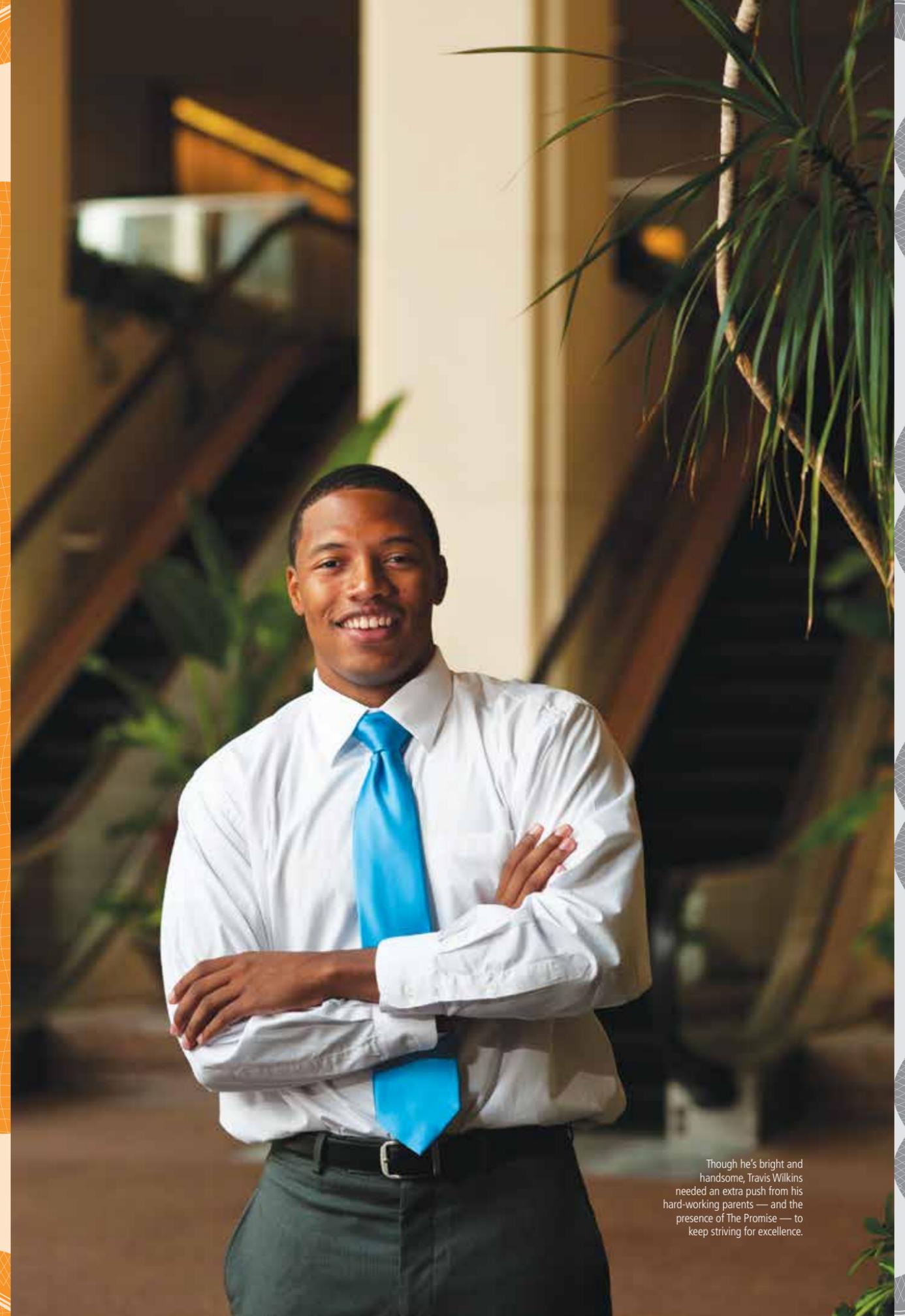
CHANGING LIVES

When The Promise was initially launched, local foundations, companies and individuals embraced the idea of a scholarship program for public high-schoolers by donating money.

It was exciting to envision the lives The Promise would change — the dramatic stories about students from low-income neighborhoods who wouldn't have gone to college without the support. Some of those stories did come true; there are

students who are currently earning degrees solely because of The Promise.

But most local students occupy that middle ground — the place where college tuition isn't impossible to afford, but it's undoubtedly tough. The place where kids are encouraged by their parents to do well in school, but those hard-working parents could really use some assistance from the community in pushing their kids to succeed. One of those students was Travis Wilkins.



Though he's bright and handsome, Travis Wilkins needed an extra push from his hard-working parents — and the presence of The Promise — to keep striving for excellence.



Travis's passion for his hometown is evident; upon graduating from Allderdice, he only traveled 90 minutes to Allegheny College's small-town campus before he was hired by a big player in the downtown corporate scene.



Meet Travis Wilkins

2012 GRADUATE OF ALLEGHENY COLLEGE

Spend a half-hour with Travis Wilkins, and you'll conclude he's likely to go far in this world — and not just because he earned a scholarship from The Pittsburgh Promise.

His handshake is firm. He looks you right in the eye when he speaks to you. He takes a thoughtful pause before answering a question and then delivers an insightful response. Travis has been blessed with an impressive mind, a handsome face and a family that cares about his education.

And yet, at key moments in his college and post-college life, The Promise has played an extraordinary role in shaping his future. It's possible that the seeds planted by the program will continue propelling him forward for years to come.

CHOOSING A SCHOOL

Travis earned reasonably good grades at Pittsburgh Allderdice High School, thanks, in part, to his parents, who kept him in check. "I have to thank [them]," he says. "They wouldn't

let me take the easier classes."

But he'll be the first to admit that he didn't always go full-throttle. "In high school, I kind of coasted a bit," he says. "I didn't realize how important [hard work] was at the time."

During his senior year, Travis was recruited by football coaches at Allegheny College, a private four-year school in Meadville, Pa. Allegheny, ranked among the nation's top-50 private liberal arts colleges by *Forbes* magazine, offers a quiet campus and traditional college atmosphere. He visited and loved it.

Allegheny wanted Travis, and he wanted to go there. The money, however, presented a challenge. Could his family afford tuition? It would be tough, especially with two more sons at home (then ages 13 and 10).

The Promise had just begun offering tuition assistance, and Travis qualified — but during that first year, the program didn't include private schools outside of Allegheny County.

MAKING IT WORK

The Wilkins family decided to take the plunge. Since Travis was accepted to a great school, they didn't want to let the opportunity pass. So he completed an on-campus work-

study to earn cash, and his parents began paying for his education.

But after two semesters, the tuition had become "a pretty big strain on my family," Travis remembers. "We talked about me transferring. I'd gotten into Penn State." That's when the family learned that The Promise had expanded to include private schools elsewhere in the region. Those few thousand dollars per year would make all the difference, enabling Travis to stay put.

While he might've flourished at Penn State, the small-school atmosphere at Allegheny — the attention from professors, the tight-knit community, the football games played outside the Big Ten spotlight — was exactly what Travis needed.

KEEPING A CONNECTION

As his college years progressed, he'd periodically receive emails from the folks at The Promise. They were doing more than just helping fund his education. "There's a lot of contact with people running The Promise," Travis says. "They stay in touch."

Being 90 minutes away from the city, he didn't attend the networking events they

What is The Pittsburgh Promise, and how has it evolved? Here's a primer on our city's unique student support and scholarship program:

What is the "Promise"? The Pittsburgh Promise will provide students with up to \$40,000 as a scholarship to pursue higher education; it will reform urban public schools so that students are prepared for success in higher education; and it will develop urban neighborhoods so that students' neighborhoods and schools are places that are conducive to learning. Beyond that, it invigorates the entire community, improves the quality of life in the region and creates a highly qualified workforce that will meet the needs of local employers, now and in the future. When did it launch? Announced in 2006, the first scholarship funds were given to high-school graduates in 2008.

How is it funded? A long list of corporations and foundations — from hometown entities like UPMC, which seeded The Promise with a \$100 million commitment, to global organizations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation — have given donations. Contributions have also come from individuals within the local community. At The Promise's gala in June, the organization announced an additional

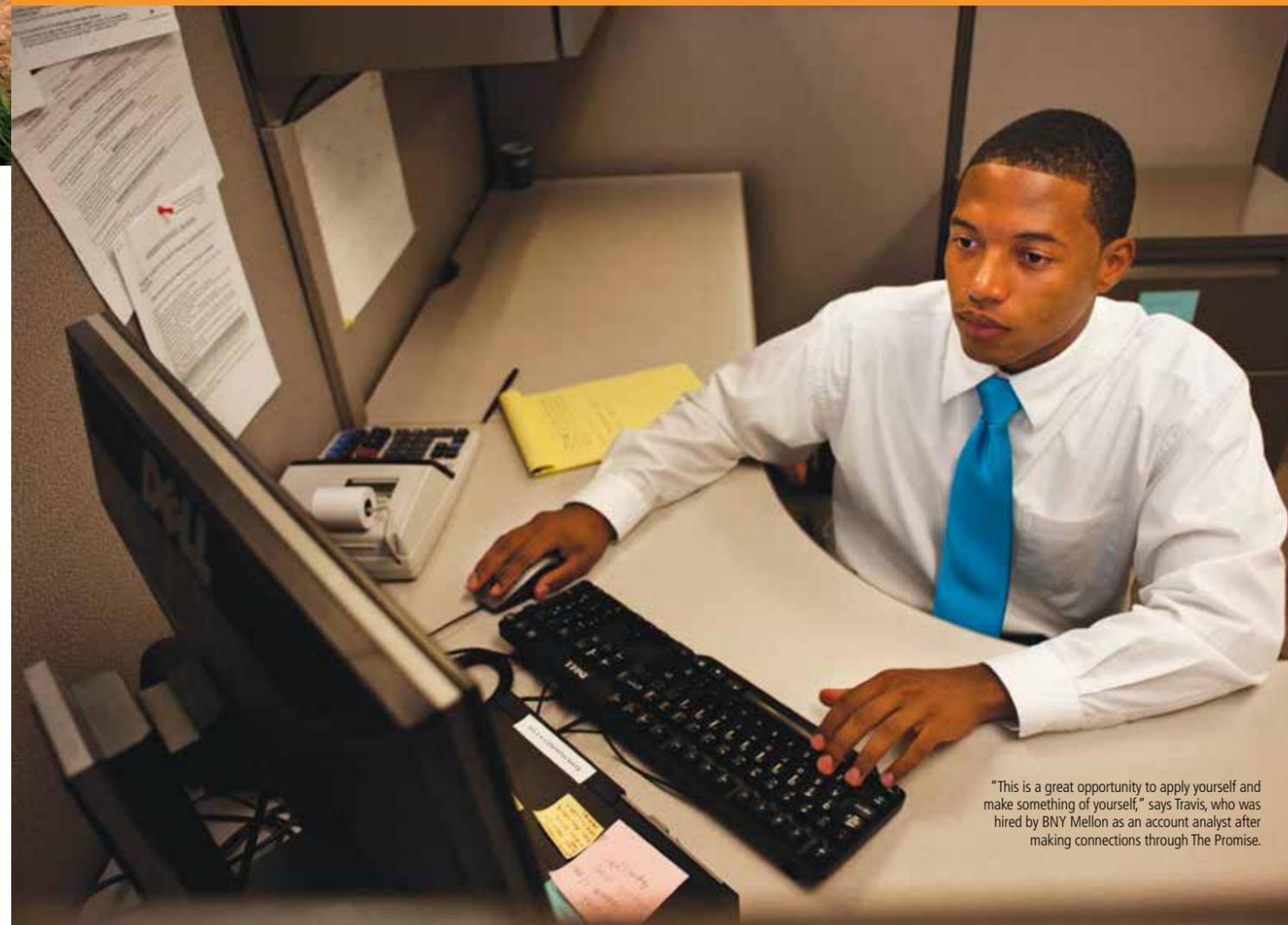
Continuous Residency and Enrollment Since	Scholarship Percentage	Annual Cash Award Is Up To a Maximum of (Class of 2012 and Beyond):
Kindergarten	100%	\$10,000
1st-5th Grade	95%	\$9,500
6th-8th Grade	85%	\$8,500
9th Grade	75%	\$7,500
10th-12th Grade	0%	\$0

Earn Up To \$40,000 for College

\$7.6 million in funding from the Heinz Endowments, the Pittsburgh Foundation, the University Club of Pittsburgh Charitable and Educational Trust, BNY Mellon, and the Massey Charitable Trust — bringing the total raised to \$160 million, huge progress toward the goal of raising \$250 million by 2018. How much money can each student receive? Students receive the maximum funding of \$40,000 throughout four years of college, if they've been enrolled in Pittsburgh's public schools since kindergarten.

How has it changed the public schools? In addition to granting scholarships, the program has grown to focus on making all public school students "promise-ready," meaning they're prepared to succeed in college. Teams of teachers (known as The Promise Readiness Corps) work directly with

small groups of students throughout their high school years, monitoring their progress and offering additional support to individual kids where needed. Beyond teaching solid skills, the program gets students thinking about college at a young age. "Lots of people, especially in the city schools who can't afford college, maybe hadn't thought about college," Travis Wilkins says. "The Promise makes people think about it." Evidence that it's working? A Rand Corp. study of The Promise, conducted in 2011, concluded the following: Pittsburgh Public Schools' enrollment has begun to stabilize since the program's inception, parents and students report being positively influenced by the program and college attendance of Pittsburgh Public Schools high school graduates also appears to be rising.



"This is a great opportunity to apply yourself and make something of yourself," says Travis, who was hired by BNY Mellon as an account analyst after making connections through The Promise.

notified him about. But in a subtle way, the messages connected him to The Promise, helping him feel like there were people watching out for him as he pushed his way through each semester.

"It's awesome," he says, to know that someone's rooting for you.

LEAVING COLLEGE

Travis graduated from Allegheny in May with an economics degree and a minor in computer science. He started sending out resumes — including several to BNY Mellon, the company he most wanted to join. He didn't hear from them, but wasn't necessarily surprised; major companies are flooded with resumes from recent grads in the springtime.

One job offer did crop up from a firm in Washington, D.C., "but it wasn't in the field of my major," he says. In the end, he turned it down in favor of staying in Pittsburgh.

Although Travis says his mindset was, "I just want a job — I'll go anywhere," he felt compelled to try launching his career in his hometown — the place that supported him in college.

That's one of the keys to The Promise: It not only helps local students obtain an education — but The Promise also motivates them to focus on regional colleges, and it connects them with companies based here so that their talent and energy can contribute to the city's success.

The Promise is committed to the "preparedness and diversity of our region's workforce," says director Saleem Ghubril. "We are taking students who are growing up here and investing in them," he says, so they're ready to take on the responsibility of building Pittsburgh's future.

"This tactic, helping a kid get to college, helping their career launch," Ghubril says, is "the leverage that The Promise brings to promoting city living ... and reforming public education."

GETTING HIRED

A few weeks after graduating, Travis and his fellow members of the first Promise class were invited to a celebration honoring some of the program's major donors. He agreed to present an award to one of the corporate donors — BNY Mellon.

At the gathering, "I said a few things about them because I knew about them from my research," Travis remembers. And after giving his brief speech, he chatted with several people from the company, getting a chance to put his face — and firm handshake — with the name on his resume.

Following the First Class

Meet two more grads from the inaugural Pittsburgh Promise group.



Nick Beckas

High School: Langley
College: Duquesne University
Total Promise Scholarship: \$20,000
Graduated with Bachelors Degree: May 2012
Currently: Graduate Student in Occupational Therapy

I remember my high-school guidance counselor trying to sway me away from private schools because of tuition," Nick Beckas says. The two were "anxious about all the loans" he'd eventually have to pay off.

Then Nick was accepted at Duquesne, a great school with great programs ... and high tuition. He truly wanted to go — but he couldn't help but worry about loans. Eventually, he enrolled because The Pittsburgh Promise "kind of eased" his nerves.

"College is nerve-wracking as it is, without worrying about money," Nick says. Promise scholarship funding "gave me a little more confidence" to push through challenging semesters at Duquesne.

In high school, he did reasonably well and "didn't have to study" — but at Duquesne, Nick was aware that his family and The Promise donors were investing a great deal of money in his future.

"Twenty-thousand dollars is no joke," he says. "I was paying for each credit I was taking. I wanted my money's worth."

His advice to local high-school students who are working toward earning the Promise? Grab any opportunity to shadow an adult at their job, or complete an internship. And study hard.

"After that event, I went in to meet with a couple of recruiters there," he says. "The next week, I had four interviews in one day."

Travis, who's currently one of BNY Mellon's account analysts, says The Promise played a central role in his achievement. "This is a great opportunity to apply yourself," he says, "and make something of yourself."

Of course, not every Pittsburgh Promise student follows this smooth of a path. And,



Sarah Walsh

High School: Brashear
College: Robert Morris University
Total Promise Scholarship: \$20,000
Graduated with Bachelors Degree: May 2012
Hired By: United Way

As Sarah Walsh approached high-school graduation, she considered first enrolling at a community college to save money (and later transferring to a four-year college). But "because of The Promise," she says, "I stayed at [Robert Morris] for all four years." Many of her peers were also able to take their preferred college path because of The Promise, she says.

Fortunately for Sarah, staying at one school meant she could really plunge into college life — like studying abroad and getting involved with athletics. She also attended several of The Promise's support and networking events, which eventually led to her learning about Pittsburgh's thriving nonprofit community.

Conversations at The Promise events led to interviews, which led to her landing a post-college job at the United Way. She started her career with solid connections and with smaller college loans, thanks to The Promise.

"It by no means paid for all of my education — but it made that dent, that little bit of a difference that mattered," she says. "The Promise opens a door."

as Travis's family has continually emphasized, life requires hard work and real effort. But The Promise has created possibilities in his life that would undoubtedly delight anyone who has given a donation — large or small — to the innovative initiative that is The Pittsburgh Promise. **PM**

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