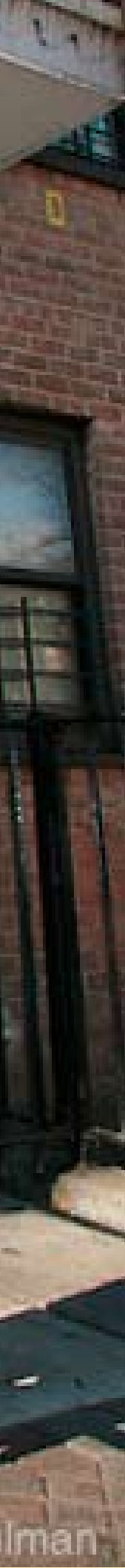


A photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a brown ribbed sweater, light blue jeans, and brown shoes. She is leaning on a black metal railing and looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background features a brick building with a prominent green door and a yellow sign with a blue symbol. The lighting is bright, suggesting an outdoor setting during the day.

PAYING IT FORWARD

By Matthew Swanson '97

Photograph by Charles Eshelman



Thanks to Quest for College, the brainchild of Gina Coleman '90, the question for many underserved high schoolers is no longer *if* they will go to college but *where*.



In the late 1960s, two young women were born in the same South Bronx neighborhood, each full of spirit, passion, and the drive to make something of herself. One was named Jennifer Lopez, and the other was Gina Coleman '90. One went on to inspire young people, transform lives, and enjoy professional success beyond her wildest childhood dreams. The other became a movie star.

I met Gina in the summer of 1998, when both of us were starting work as assistant directors of admission for Williams. We've been friends ever since.

Gina is the kind of person who won't tolerate a problem, who gives generously of her energy and strength, who elevates the lives of those around her by insisting that immediate attention be paid to dreams that might otherwise be abandoned. If there is something that should be done, Gina will do it. It is my sense that she has always been this way.

Raised by her grandmother, Gina was taught to view education as an exit strategy. When an attentive sixth-grade teacher suggested that her willful pupil forgo the neighborhood junior high for one with links to the A Better Chance (ABC) program, Gina's grandmother didn't blink. Gina joined five other young women of less-fortunate means at a strong public high school in Wellesley, Mass., for her sophomore, junior, and senior years. Living together in a group home, the girls received resources and support and the expectation that they would go to college.

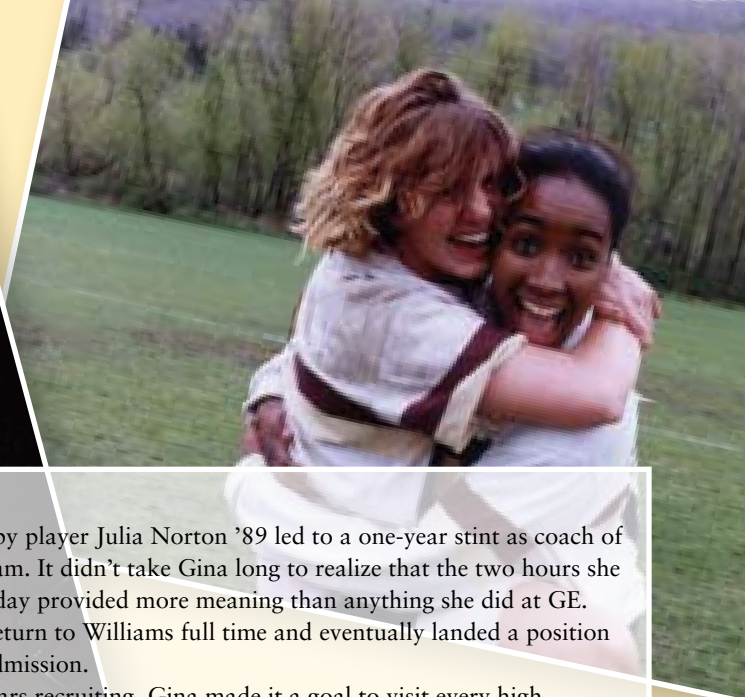
Steve and Michele Rogers, both Williams '79, were the house parents for ABC in Wellesley Gina's junior year. They took the girls on a tour of campuses in the northeast that summer and stopped in Berkshire

County. Gina remembers mixed sensations on the drive from Five Corners to Williams—astonishment at the beauty of the landscape and nausea at the winding road. Climbing out of the “way back” of the Rogers' wood-paneled station wagon, she saw Thompson Chapel and fell in love. Visions of the college in the valley became the carrot that led her through senior year.

At Williams Gina studied English and Spanish, her two native languages, and went out for softball. Her junior advisor, captain of the women's rugby team, repeatedly urged Gina to consider playing for the squad. Though interested, Gina sheepishly explained, “I can't afford it. I don't own a horse.” Once the subtle differences between polo and rugby were ironed out, she discovered a lifelong passion.

She spent her summers in Spanish Harlem with kids from backgrounds similar to her own, teaching everything from physical education and character development to English and math. Although the summer program had no formal college prep component, Gina noticed an intense curiosity about college among the students and found herself wishing that they had access to the kind of support she had through ABC.

In the years following Williams, Gina chose the Berkshires over any particular professional ambition. She sold \$1,500 vacuum cleaners door to door before finding a position as a youth counselor at a facility for physically and emotionally abused children. Then she spent five years exploring the world of thermoengineered plastics at GE in Pittsfield, paid off her college loans, and woke up one morning realizing that she was missing something.



A call from fellow rugby player Julia Norton '89 led to a one-year stint as coach of the Williams women's team. It didn't take Gina long to realize that the two hours she spent on the pitch every day provided more meaning than anything she did at GE. She looked for ways to return to Williams full time and eventually landed a position as assistant director of admission.

During her first few years recruiting, Gina made it a goal to visit every high school—private, public, and parochial—in the state of Massachusetts. As she did, a landscape of stark inequity began to emerge. “The kids from private schools knew everything about the college search and application process, whereas the kids from the majority of the publics knew almost nothing,” she says. “It occurred to me that I could do something to level the playing field.”

Many of the students Gina encountered in rural or disadvantaged urban classrooms were the products of households that either did not value college or didn't consider it a realistic possibility, often due to perceived cost barriers. Their guidance counselors were too preoccupied with day-to-day school issues to provide much assistance with preparing for college—or in securing the scholarships or financial aid to pay for it.

Gina was frustrated and a little angry. I was party to long lunches of animated tirade as she considered the problem and contemplated solutions. Her “Eureka!” moment was informed by an article she read about the effectiveness of fun in learning and motivation. A few days later she came to me with an idea that would define the next decade of her life.

Gina imagined a board game that would provide a forum for sharing information about college in a format that was engaging and interactive. She developed a series of questions and prompts meant to stimulate discussion and a simple board that traced the journey from the start of high school to college admission. The game would be played by a group of students divided into teams and moderated by people who could contribute stories from their own college experiences. The game was called Quest for College.

Gina took a prototype into two area high schools, where it was a hit. Students were engaged by the competitive format and took the game seriously. More important, they reacted positively to Gina's own stories, which made college into something more than books and tests. The mentoring aspects of the game turned out to be as important as the information it provided.

In January 2000, Gina and I taught a Winter Study course that sent Williams students into 9th- and 10th-grade classrooms to play Quest for College with Berkshire County students. (Gina has taught the course every year since.) The feedback from counselors was encouraging. The high school students were interested and energized. Conversation about college increased. There was a subtle but noticeable shift as students started looking forward and considering a new set of options.

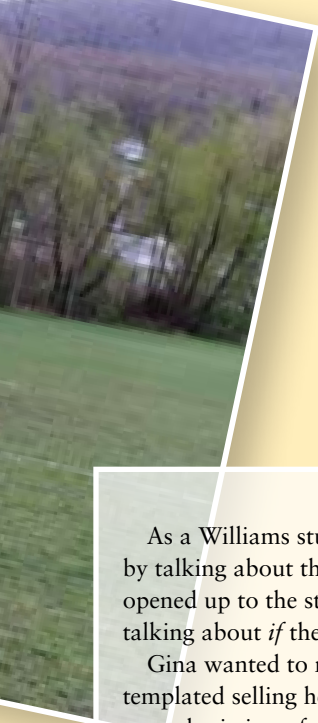
One student changed by the experience was Shelley Williamson '10, who grew up in nearby Pittsfield. Even as a junior, she observed a disparity among her classmates.

“The separation between the non-college bound and the college-bound students was very apparent,” she says, “not just in how they were viewed, but in how they viewed themselves.”



These pages, clockwise from above: Gina Coleman (middle) with fourth-grade friends; in the studio with Misty Blues; with Williams rugby teammate and classmate Rebecca Mattson '90; with the Wellesley High School band; in her Williams senior picture.

Previous pages: (left) Gina revisits the South Bronx neighborhood where she grew up; (right) at age 5.



As a Williams student, Williamson became a Quest for College moderator. “Just by talking about the different resources available, a whole new world of possibilities opened up to the students,” she says. “By the time the bell rang, they were no longer talking about *if* they were going to go to college, but *where* they were going to go.”

Gina wanted to make the game available to other communities in need. She contemplated selling her idea to a major game distributor but worried that its fundamental mission of accessibility would be compromised. So in the summer of 2006, on the advice of fellow Williams alumni, she established the nonprofit Quest for College Inc. (QFC) to distribute the game and train others in its use.

In its first year, QFC expanded its reach to work with Amherst College, Berea College, Connecticut College, GE’s Greater Boston Volunteer Corps, and Luther Burbank High School in San Antonio. The nonprofit also joined forces with the Berkshire Compact, an alliance of area educators, businesspeople, and politicians working to expand access to education.

“The Quest for College game is a natural fit with the work that we are doing to help raise aspirations and demystify the college experience, so that college is something that all residents of the Berkshires can imagine as part of their future,” says Mary Grant, president of Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA) in North Adams and a major voice in the Berkshire Compact.

Gina is now hoping to develop a free, online version of the game. Another project in the works is Awareness Springfield, which would provide the tools and resources to build college awareness programs in the Springfield, Mass., school district.

“Whether the game is being moderated by college students in a high school classroom or played by a single student online,” she says, “the important thing is that the information gets out there, into the right hands, at the right time, so that kids have the chance to get the education they need to follow their dreams, to have higher hopes for themselves.”

As for her own dreams, last summer Gina was named a Williams dean, overseeing international students and those in the QuestBridge program, which links bright, motivated, low-income students across the country with educational and scholarship opportunities at colleges like Williams. Last spring, she completed a PhD in educational administration from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. And last fall she was asked to serve on MCLA’s board of trustees. She is president of a growing nonprofit, is in the midst of her 11th year as Williams’ head rugby coach, and sings lead vocals for blues band Misty Blues on the side.

Unlike her South Bronx neighbor J. Lo, Gina hasn’t been nominated for a Grammy or Golden Globe—yet. But Gina says her proudest accomplishment was moving her grandmother from the projects to the Berkshires, where she spent the last six years of her life.

Not bad for a girl who doesn’t own a horse. ■

Matthew Swanson '98 is author of the volumes published by Idiots'Books, a freelance writer, and director of special projects for the North Charles Street Design Organization in Baltimore, Md.