

## From Cabrini to M.D.: ‘There is no limit’

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Kamilah C. Banks-Word

For those who dare to dream, life has a way of making a path for that dream.

Such is the case for Kamilah C. Banks-Word, who is on track to earn a medical degree in psychiatry from the Chicago Medical School this year.

Banks-Word grew up in CHA's Cabrini-Green public housing development in a female-headed household with four younger brothers.

On Friday, she will join thousands of other medical doctors across the country for "Match Day," a ceremony in which new doctors learn where they will spend their residencies.

That Banks-Word, 35, will take part in this tradition is proof that even children born into difficult circumstances can succeed if they have support.

"Throughout my life when I meet people and I tell them where I grew up and what I've been through, people are always surprised," she told me.

"I feel like there are more people like me and more of us need to speak up and be open to having discussions about the possibilities in life, so we can continue to break down the stereotypes about people who grow up in low-income areas and African Americans in general," she said.

Banks-Word is not a traditional medical student. She earned a bachelor's degree at Southern Illinois University, and a master's degree in school psychology at Middle Tennessee State University, but she ended up working in retail sales for four years.

A chance encounter with a medical student in 2004 motivated her to set her sights on medical school. After completing several intense preparatory programs, Banks-Word was accepted at the Chicago Medical School in North Chicago.

"I wanted to do more than therapy and counseling. I wanted to know what happens to the human mind and body," she said.

The seed for that ambitious goal was planted when Banks-Word was only 8 years old.

“I can recall seeing my grandmother sitting by her kitchen window, and she would just abruptly yell out profanities to someone who wasn’t there,” Banks-Word said.

“Sometimes she would hit herself in the face. She was never physically or verbally abusive toward us, but it was obvious she was hallucinating. These odd things piqued my interest.”

Although her divorced mother was raising five kids on her own, she provided a “strong family foundation,” Banks-Word said.

“Even in early adolescence, she told me and my brothers that education is very important. She worked blue-collar jobs but was always available in the evening to help us with schoolwork and make sure we were ready for school. I’m not sure how she did all that,” Banks-Word said.

She went to Newberry Academy and Lincoln Park High School, where she said teachers were both challenging and encouraging.

“Even though I grew up in the projects, I was exposed to a variety of different cultures. Lincoln Park was pretty diverse. There were African-American, Caucasian, Asian, Middle Eastern students. I went to their homes and saw how they lived. It motivated me and it pushed me to aspire for more beyond what I saw in my immediate neighborhood.”

On Friday, Banks-Word will open an envelope that represents an achievement that too many of us believe is out of reach for young people who are growing up in poverty today.

It isn’t.

“There is no limit to what they can do in this life,” Banks-Word said.

“I would tell them: Don’t let anyone discourage you from pursuing your dreams and goals . . . regardless of the obstacles that you may encounter. . . . There will be obstacles no matter what; that is just part of life. But if you remain determined, diligent and persistent, there is no doubt that you will reach whatever level you desire in life.”

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