



High school pals, from a yearbook picture (all in the front row): Dave Nachbar (left), Gary Caplan (center), Mike Kesner (second from right) and Lee Gordon (right).

Photo by Joaer Davis
College Bound founders today: Gary Caplan (from left), Lee Gordon, Dave Nachbar, Rick Levitz and Mike Kesner.



Friends on a mission Highland Park classmates keep in touch by helping needy kids go to college

By Meg Murphy
Special to the Tribune

Growing up in Highland Park, the men behind one of the area's newest charitable endeavors were in almost constant contact as often is the case with neighborhood buddies and classmates.

But as time went on, the men's commitments to their growing families and careers took time away from those friendships, which for some stretch as far back as kindergarten.

Rather than just use golf or some other social activity as a way of keeping in touch, the men decided to use their business contacts and talent to help youngsters just graduating from high school.

The result is College Bound Inc., a not-for-profit corporation that provides scholarship money to disadvantaged youngsters from anywhere in the Chicago area so they can attend the college of their choice.

"We all had a common interest in kids that evolved into helping kids go to college," said Gary Caplan, the organization's current president and one of the five founders.

College Bound, founded in the fall of 1996, is the brainchild of Caplan, who now lives in Chicago; Highland Park's Rick Levitz, Lee Gordon and David Nachbar; and Michael Kesner, who now lives in Vernon Hills.

Although they now are all 34 years old, the schoolyard pals easily recalled their own experiences at Highland Park High School, joking about past

pranks and their prowess on the basketball court, where they were all members of the school's freshman squad.

They laugh when they think about their high school selves, doubting that they would have impressed the College Bound selection committee when they were teenagers and members of the class of 1981.

The five have gone on to careers in law, the investment business and insurance, among other professions.

They said their experience in diverse fields helps them solicit advice and funds from a variety of corporations in the Chicago area.

They have persuaded about 20 professional men and women to form the group's board of directors and always are searching for more people to bring even more diverse perspectives to College Bound.

The first class of College Bound Inc. scholars is made up of 10 young men and women. They are enrolled in colleges across the country, including Northwestern University, Spelman College in Atlanta and Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn.

The amounts the young people receive differ, although the College Bound directors have made a commitment to providing that level of funding throughout the students' four years of undergraduate study; scholarships are renewed if the students maintain at least a C average and fulfill requirements to keep in touch through essays and personal contact.

Some of the freshmen needed only \$250 to bridge the gap between college costs and other scholarships

and financial aid. For others, College Bound was able to provide more than \$2,500.

The kids selected to receive the money are not necessarily straight-A students, but they have demonstrated potential in a variety of disciplines or through community service.

"We wanted to get kids who we thought would succeed (in the world)," Levitz said.

The organization required interviews of scholarship applicants with board members. "We just get a feel for whether they are going to achieve in life," Nachbar said.

After the first interviews last year, "we were just floored" by how mature these kids were, how focused, Caplan recalled. "These kids were just universally unbelievable."

The interviews for the next batch of scholars are scheduled for the end of March. The College Bound founders said they hope to increase the amount of money they give out from the initial payout of \$20,000 the first year for the first 10 students.

All five of the founders said they were surprised that their first fundraising event, held at a downtown bar on a weeknight, drew a large group of supporters and raised more than \$25,000. This will become an annual fundraiser, organizers say, a "homecoming" event each fall in which the scholars can mingle with guests to share school experiences. That kind of continuing involvement with the scholars is central to the group's plan.

The students are expected to stay in contact with board members to provide updates on their progress. Also, each summer, the students must submit essays

summarizing their school year as part of the requirements for continuing to receive financial help.

"They provide you with a support system, someone to talk to," said Eleanor Eiland, 19, of Chicago, a freshman at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "The chemical-engineering major was one of the first recipients, getting only \$250 to fill the funding gap, but she appreciates the benefits beyond the money. 'I think that they really try to keep in touch,' she added.

Recognizing that college is merely the beginning path for careers, College Bound also offers a summer jobs program to the participants, setting up internships with the founders' companies as well as outside businesses.

Joel Massel is a consultant to not-for-profit organizations and serves as executive director of College Bound.

He has worked with a lot of people in the not-for-profit field, but the five friends behind College Bound stand out to him, partly because of their enthusiasm.

"This really means a lot to them. They work really hard," Massel said. "It's really exciting to work with a group that's excited and growing."

For their part, the group's founders say it's nice to have a joint project that allows them all to keep in touch on an almost daily basis.

"We're all successful in our fields," Levitz said; "it's nice to have a shared success."

The Tribune's Catherine D'Amico contributed to this report.