**Through the Eyes of a JMG Specialist**

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Heading into her final year at Windham High School, like a lot of seniors, Savanna had her sights set on college; unfortunately, she also had a father in prison and a mother disabled by a severe autoimmune disease. When I met her, I was heading into my second year as the MELMAC College and Career Specialist at Windham. It was a fairly new position created through a partnership between the MELMAC Education Foundation and JMG. MELMAC believes students who start exploring different post-secondary pathways early in their high school career will be far more successful in transitioning to that next chapter.

I knew Savanna was going to need my help. Along with going to school full-time, this 18- year- old was also the primary breadwinner in her family, which meant paying for rent, phone, electricity and car insurance. Savanna also took care of a 4-year-old sister, drove her mother to medical appointments, and when her father was released from prison half-way through her senior year, Savanna transported him to and from job interviews. Despite these challenges, my hope was to keep her on track for college. I helped her study in order to bring up her SAT scores. Together, we filled out reams of financial aid forms, doing what we could to show that Savanna was on her own financially, without parental support. I was able to help her navigate what can be an overwhelming college application process by breaking it down and encouraging her to take it step-by-step. [Savanna is one of many who need help: Read more]

Savanna is only one of many young people throughout Maine who need this support. The workloads placed on guidance counselors is growing, leaving them with limited time to work with students on planning for life after high school. Thanks to JMG’s partnership with the MELMAC Education Foundation, I am able to lead exploratory trips to local colleges and universities, as well as apprenticeship programs and employers. I host financial aid events, college admission representatives, and College & Career fairs. And the best part? My help doesn’t end on graduation day. I follow up, checking in with graduates to see how they are transitioning and to offer my support.

Today, I’m happy to say Savanna is wrapping up her first semester at Southern Maine Community College and ultimately, plans to earn a degree in nursing. While she pursues her dream, *my* goal is to have every student walk across the stage at graduation with confidence in whichever post-secondary path they have chosen. And when they take that next step toward adulthood, I want them to know I’m still here, ready to help in whatever way I can.