

sanity fair

BY ED GRIFFIN-NOLAN

Ten Dollars and a Dream

New Times readers can help fund the Say Yes Choice Grants and put Syracuse on the map

Last month in her State of the City address, freshly minted Mayor Stephanie Miner displayed a self-deprecating sense of humor that many of us hadn't seen before. I am not tall, said the mayor. "I did not run for this office on the grounds that Syracuse needed a tall mayor and, thankfully, a majority of the voters agreed with me." As far back as we can tell, no mayor of Syracuse has ever admitted to being short. Since all 52 of her predecessors were male it is also highly likely that none of them stopped to ask for directions either.

Miner made another bold statement before the Jan. 28 standing-room-only crowd at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry. She announced that she would guarantee a college scholarship to every student who graduates from a city high school. If you have been fol-

lowing the progress of the Say Yes to Education program over the past two years, you know that this was a very tall order indeed. Say Yes," she promised, hoping to end some ambivalence about the program, "is for everyone."

Say Yes to Education already guarantees tuition to students who go to SUNY or City University of New York schools. Syracuse University guarantees tuition to any student qualified to attend, likewise the tuition-free Cooper Union in New York City. Before the recession hit, 26 other private colleges had also agreed to provide scholarships. In lean times, they cut back their offer to exclude families making more than \$75,000 per year.

That caveat began to diminish confidence in Say Yes. The Say Yes program stands on two legs—student support and scholarships. It has twin goals—educational improvement and urban revitalization. The Say Yes Foundation, along with SU and the Syracuse City School District, is spending millions each year to improve learning among students, most of them poor.

The scholarship offer is crucial to keeping middle-class families in the city and to attracting other middle-class families to move in.

The scholarship offer is an incentive which, once widely understood, has the potential to reverse the decline in our city's population and our tax base. When she visited Washington recently, Miner correctly observed that all the other mayors she met with complained of declining census and tax rolls. Only Syracuse—repeat, only Syracuse—has a Say Yes program district wide.

Ten years from now Syracuse could find itself in the unique and enviable position of being the first Rust Belt city to pull out of its slide, by using education to turn the tide. Ten years from now we could find ourselves surrounded by new neighbors who have come from all over the state and the region to avail themselves of a town that offers incredibly low home prices, good schools and the promise of a free college education for their kids.

Truth is that Say Yes is the best thing to come to this town in a long time. It is to our economy what Carmelo Anthony was to SU basketball. Truth is that it may not only be our best hope, it may be our last hope for a turnaround.

The trick here is that we have to believe. Can we believe in it? I say we have to.

Middle-class families have to believe that the promised scholarships are real. Poor families have to believe that the promise really applies to them. Parents have to believe that the struggling schools really will improve.

Mayor Miner knows that when the private schools made their pledge income dependent, the credibility of Say Yes took a hit. Double-income working families giving birth to their first child probably aspire to make more than a combined 75K 18 years down the road. Opening the Say Yes promise back up to everyone could make the difference between a family settling in Eastwood or settling in East Syracuse.

So the mayor promised that Say Yes was for everybody, and promised all families that she would transfer the value of the SUNY scholarship to any kid who wants to attend a private college. Starting right now, this year.

The mayor has taken a bold stand; she's climbed out on a limb and said this is going to happen, no matter what. That's what

leaders should do: take chances, make commitments. In short, lead, and then hope that others will follow.

Problem is that there is, as of yet, no money to back up the promise. The mayor says the money will be found, but the feds don't have it, the state has less, and the private sources that back Say Yes have already given more than they promised. Nobody wants to consider a city tax hike because it makes no sense to fund a program to bring new people into the city with a tax hike that pushes others out.

So that leaves you and me. This is a very strategic investment. It would cost about \$300,000 this year. We can fund it. Yes, we can.

At a bare minimum, 30,000 people pick up this paper every week. I'd say that at least 30,000 of us love this town enough to put 10 bucks in a hat. You've been getting a free newspaper every week for 41 years—this is the first time we've ever asked you to pay up. Say Yes to Education is a once-in-a-generation chance. We need to understand how much of a difference it can make. Say Yes believes in us. We have to believe in the promise. Are you with us?

Write a \$10 check to the Say Yes Fund at the Central New York Community Foundation, 500 S. Salina St., Syracuse, 13202. Put a note in the memo line saying it's from *The New Times*, and it's for the Say Yes Choice Grants.

Let's give ourselves one more reason to believe in our town. □

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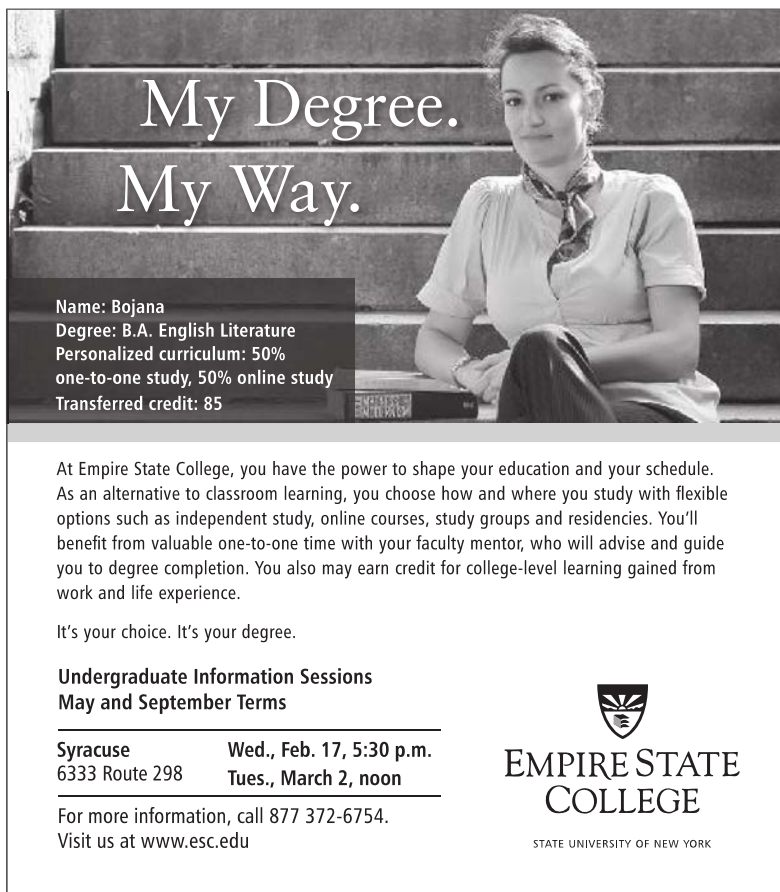
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