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Tears and accolades flow

at STEP student graduation celebration

By VALERIE ABRAHAMS

Two years ago when Robert Lee became a finalist for the Scarsdale Transfer Education Program he was nervous about meeting new people and the prospect of leaving his family and Craigmont High School in his hometown, Memphis, Tenn. But diverse educational and cultural opportunities awaited him in suburban New York.

"Little did he know how far he would go and how deeply he would impact his adopted community," STEP co-chairman Debra Hyman said at his high school graduation celebration on June 25. With pride, and not just a few tears, the STEP board of directors gathered at the home of Lisa and Andrew Rodman, with Lee and his parents and sister visiting from Memphis,



DEBRA HYMAN PHOTO

STEP student Robert Lee, center, at his graduation party June 25 with his sister Rhasheeka and parents, Felicia and Robert Lee Sr., of Memphis, Tenn., and his STEP host parents, Nan and Lee Berke of Scarsdale.

to laud his achievements and launch him into the next chapter of his life as a student at Vanderbilt University.

During his two years in

Scarsdale, Lee was a high achiever in his academic classes and he easily earned the respect and admiration of his teachers, advisors and

friends, Hyman said.

He volunteered in several Scarsdale High School community service clubs, including Hawthorne Cedar Knolls, Global Camps for Africa, Cooking for a Cause, Midnight Run and Invisible Child. He became an officer for Habitat for Humanity, a representative for the class of 2015 student government and spent many hours with the senior prom committee. In the senior class performance of "Legally Blonde," Lee played the role of an admissions officer. He also was active with the Scarsdale Congregational Church.

At the end of his senior year, he received six SHS volunteer service awards and a Rotary scholarship for outstanding contributions through community service.

Lee made history as the first
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STEP scholar to travel abroad through the SHS language exchange, making lifelong friends in Scarsdale and Spain and impressing teachers and advisors alike, according to Hyman.

His lifestyle and diet changed dramatically in Scarsdale, to the point where he “became half the man you used to be through exercise and healthy nutrition,” Hyman said of his dramatic weight loss. With his host family and STEP friends he tried downhill and cross-country skiing and hiking, and he learned to swim at the JCC.

Through a part-time job at Zachys during the 2014 holiday season, Lee became familiar with fine wine, and during senior options at the Studio Museum in Harlem he learned to navigate New York’s public transportation system.

His work ethic and community service helped Lee gain admission to Vanderbilt, his dream school since he was 8 years old, with a full scholarship. He also received a prestigious Ingram Scholarship that recognizes academic strength and dedication to community service for students who intend to make public service part of their professional life. As a finalist for that award, Lee conducted his winning interview via Skype while in Spain on the SHS exchange trip.

“At STEP we live the expression ‘It takes a village to raise

a child’ and we know you lived it,” Hyman said to Lee. Through time spent with STEP board members and other people in the community, “You learned from every one, appreciating their gift of mentorship.”

His embrace of volunteerism and fundraising “is an inspiration for future STEP scholars. You took advantage of every opportunity that STEP has to offer, and then you turned around and made us proud.”

She continued: “Keep your sharp mind, positive energy, big heart and selfless attitude focused on growing and learning and taking in all Vanderbilt and Nashville have to offer. ... They are fortunate to have you for the next four years because we know from experience that you will leave them changed for the better.”

Nan and Lee Berke of Nelson Road and their three sons, including SHS senior Steven, hosted Lee during these two formative years. Nan Berke said being a STEP parent was a gratifying experience: “You get to positively change the course of the student’s life and broaden your family life at the same time.” She thanked retired SHS teacher Eric Rothschild for founding STEP 50 years ago. “I’ve seen how amazingly generous Scarsdale is,” she said, and choking back tears, she added: “After the unspeakable horror in Charleston [last month], STEP is an amazing light and antidote to all the horribleness.”

Lee Berke described the “very polite, very quiet young man” they first met at LaGuardia Airport. But when the family hosted a party for Robert Lee on the Monday before graduation, “he was surrounded by 68 of his closest friends,” Berke said.

Berke also noted the “amazing range of service activities” Lee engaged in, and he thanked the boy’s parents for loaning him to this community.

Noting how he personally was affected by the STEP program, Berke turned to founder Rothschild and said: “In life one tries to help as many people as you can, but it is tremendously gratifying to help at least one life ... I hope we have lived up to that.”

Hyman congratulated the graduate’s parents, Felicia and Robert Lee, saying: “We are proud to have called him our own these last two years and we share the pride you feel for his graduation and the accomplishments he will achieve in the future.”

Lee’s mother expressed her gratitude, saying: “I had no idea that just by saying ‘yes he can go’ that it was going to bless me so deeply. ... Since [Robert] was 3 years old it was a struggle to get him to open up and be sociable. STEP gave Robert another family that could relate to him and polish him up. He’s shining like a 100 watt light bulb because of you.”

Sharing his thoughts with the group, Lee said, “In middle school I was overweight and

depressed; I had no confidence that I could do anything.” Once he was accepted to STEP, he recalled, “I didn’t think about the things I would gain and how many hearts I would connect with here... But you have really changed my life.

“Thinking now about the person I used to be, how I’ve changed inside and out, it boggles my mind. My life will no longer contain the phrase ‘I can’t,’ but instead I’ll say ‘I will’.”

Lee was visibly overwhelmed as he thanked STEP and the school community for “making me a part of the Scarsdale family. ... Having been a student here, I can say I am leaving with the knowledge that I can step through any hurdle that comes my way.”

For the next two years, Drs. Elissa and Scott Bookner and their family will host incoming STEP scholar Summer Montileaux of Porcupine, S.D., a member of the Pine Ridge Reservation’s Lakota Oglala Sioux tribe. She joins STEP student Dontavius Holmes of Memphis, a senior who resides in Scarsdale with Bettina and Michael Klein during the school year.

STEP is supported through monetary and in-kind donations. Those interested in learning more about STEP, donating funds or services, or becoming a host family, may contact STEP at info@scarsdalestep.org or www.scarsdalestep.org.