

After her mother died of cancer, Tamara Minott has had people like Renee Schonfeld behind her for support. Photo by Linda Rosier/Daily News

From fending for herself to helping those in need

BY CHRISTINA BOYLE
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

WHEN Tamara Minott excels at school, she remembers her mother telling her to be the best.

When she is asked to settle a dispute between two students as a peer mentor, she hears her mom telling her to keep an open mind.

And when Tamara graduates from Abraham Lincoln High School in Coney Island this month with one of the highest-grade point averages in her class, she knows her mother, who died

of cancer nearly two years ago, would be very proud.

"When I got an 80 average she'd tell me to get 90, she always wanted me to push for better," Tamara says.

"She didn't graduate from college but if I could be half the person she was, it would

be something."

Tamara's easy smile and generous spirit give no hint of the pain she has had to deal with as a girl.

She was just 16 when her mom, Dawn, died at 41, after a year-long battle with cervical cancer. Tamara was not only forced to fend for herself, but also had to care of her 12-year-old sister, Tiana.

"Mom would say, 'One day you're going to need each other,'" Tamara says.

"We are sisters so we bicker, but it has brought us a lot closer together. When I compare my sister and I to other children I think, 'How

would they deal with this?' and I know we're doing well. I would like to give the glory to my mother."

The two girls, now 18 and 14, live alone in an apartment in Flatlands, Brooklyn, and have to manage the day-to-day running of a household while also juggling schoolwork and after-school activities.

They have a large family living nearby and they see their father on weekends, but, when it comes to cleaning, cooking, studying and paying bills with the Social Security benefits they receive, the sisters depend on each other.

"I like to blame [our success] on my mother," Tamara says. "I like to say she raised us to be like that."

Tamara's ability to succeed is already clear as not only is she in the fast-track school honors program but has just been awarded a scholarship to study psychology at Stony Brook University.

"Deciding what college to go to has been the biggest decision I've ever had to make," Tamara says. "I didn't know if

I wanted to leave my sister, but my mother wanted me to go away. She was like: 'You're going to college,' so as long as my sister is fine, I'm okay."

Renee Schonfeld, college counselor at Lincoln, has been by Tamara's side throughout the college application process and the pair now have a strong bond.

"To me Tamara exemplifies what a class act is," says Schonfeld, 54. "She moves through life with grace and dignity and a lot of tolerance, even though she's had a lot of sorrow to deal with."

She adds: "She really doesn't have anybody in her life that would push her so she pushes herself do to well.

"She's taken some of the most challenging courses here, she's very perceptive but not opinionated at all, she's diplomatic and tactful and there's something I feel is outstanding in terms of her personality. She has a kind spirit."

Tamara knows it will be tough leaving Lincoln and her Brooklyn home, but she is looking to the future and hopes to be a social worker one day.

"I know that she's going to be a success," Schonfeld says. "I know she will do it."

TAMARA MINOTT
MENTOR:
Renee Schonfeld

He wouldn't let obstacles hold him back

BY ABBY LUBY
DAILY NEWS WRITER

GREGORY Herman's world fell apart three years ago when he was 14. His father was incarcerated and his mom couldn't afford the rent so the family was evicted from their home and went to live with relatives.

Gregory had to leave his dream high school, Cardinal Spellman in the Bronx, because his mom could no longer afford the tuition. For about a month he dropped out of school to take care of his three younger siblings, including one brother with Down syndrome.

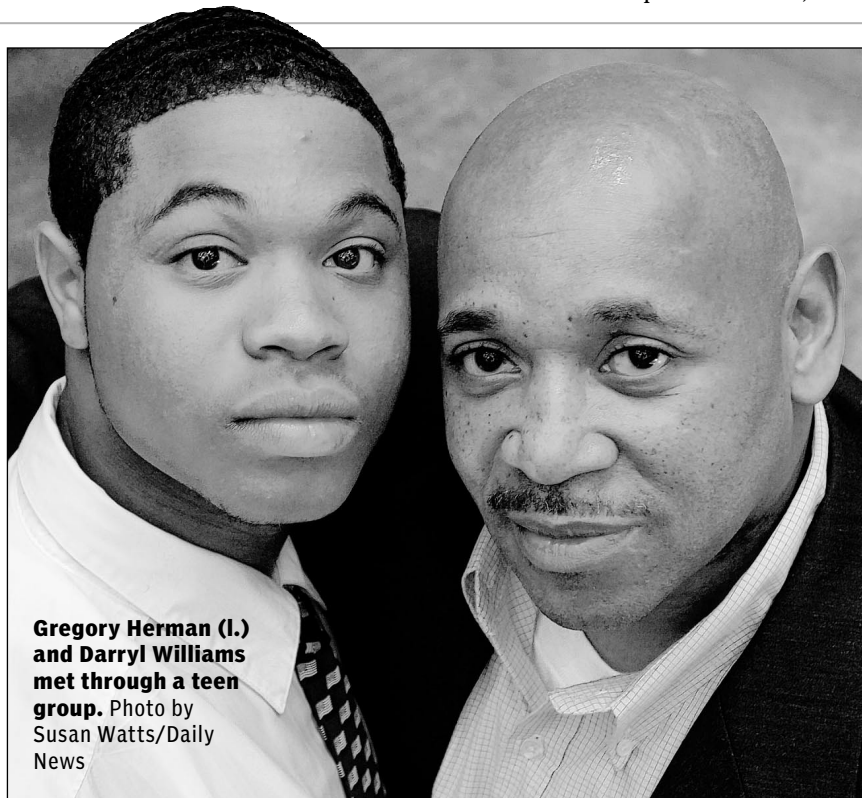
Eventually they moved into a Manhattan homeless shelter and Gregory enrolled at Wadleigh Secondary School on W. 114th St., where, despite his difficult home life, he was able to focus on his schoolwork.

"I had a responsibility to be a good role model for my brothers and sister," says Gregory, who is now a 17-year-old senior. "I couldn't let them see me slipping. I wanted them to compete with me."

Gregory says he had to stay on track with his schoolwork because he wanted to make his father proud. "My father always told me how important school is. Before he went into jail he just kept saying, 'School, school, school.'"

One day a friend brought Gregory to a teen group for guys at St. John's Baptist Church in Manhattan, where kids could openly talk about their problems. It was there that Gregory met the group leader, Darryl Williams.

Williams noticed Gregory right away because he was shy but good-natured.



Gregory Herman (l.) and Darryl Williams met through a teen group. Photo by Susan Watts/Daily News

"Gregory hung out at the sidelines," says Williams, executive director of Moravia Open Door, a group that works with homeless people. "I was concerned about the choices he would make for his life and who his male role models would be."

Williams, 47, mentored Gregory by involving him with church programs like distributing winter meals to the poor and helping to lead AIDS awareness groups.

"He gained confidence and didn't mind speaking to the group. He was good at helping others," says Williams.

Despite his many home responsibilities, Gregory excelled in school and maintained a 98 average, the highest in the school. He was able to help friends study for tests, an effort noticed by a mentoring organization known as Foundation for Excellent Schools (FES), which formally trained Gregory to mentor younger students and be a student leader.

"FES opened my eyes," says Gregory,

who began mentoring students last year in the FES program. "I now help my peers apply for college and study for the SAT exams."

With a daily schedule that includes school, community volunteering, taking care of his siblings and helping kids at school, Gregory's day starts before dawn and ends late at night. "Sometimes I never see daylight," he says.

His hard work has paid off. A few months ago, Gregory got accepted into the University of Vermont on a full scholarship. "I will miss my family a lot," he says. "Being on my own will also be a challenge."

Last July, Gregory's father was released from prison after serving time for a drug offense and today the family expects to be moving out of the shelter and into their own home.

Gregory, who plans on majoring in psychology, has his own plans for the future.

"When I graduate college, I would like to open a place to help kids like my brother."

GREGORY HERMAN
MENTOR:
DARRYL WILLIAMS