

Mercy announces leadership center for girls of color

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Helping Our Lady of Mercy High School recruit and mentor young women of color from impoverished backgrounds was supposed to be the great project of Cheryl Speranza's later years. Instead, it will happen at an institute named in her memory.

The private girls school in Brighton announced Friday the creation of the Cheryl Speranza Leadership Institute, aimed at girls of color and the economically disadvantaged. It will accept its first class of 11 ninth-graders in the fall.

Cheryl Speranza died of pancreatic cancer in March, leaving her husband, former Wegmans Vice Chairman Paul Speranza, to see the project through. He and their family foundation are donating \$1.2 million in start-up funding.

"One thing we saw over and over (in traveling across the country) was a lack of women of color in any high leadership positions in any segment of society, Speranza said. "I'm stating the obvious, but it's true. ... We felt so strongly about Mercy and what Mercy can do for young women, and it all came together."

The institute will fund 11 scholarships for "emerging leaders from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, such as young women with limited financial and emotional support."

Beyond four years of tuition, those students will also have access to mentors and other advocates. The school also intends to develop a leadership curriculum that will be used throughout the school.

"This will benefit all our students," said Christian Jensen, Mercy's vice president of institutional advancement. "It's a lot bigger than 11 scholarships. They're going to touch lives and inspire generations of future leaders."

Mercy will formally announce the news on campus Thursday with a keynote address by Bernice King, daughter of Martin Luther King Jr. and CEO of The King Center.

members will volunteer to serve as mentors.

'New girls' network'

The ultimate goal, Speranza said, is to counter the effect of the "old boys' network" by creating a "new girls' network." The students accepted into the institute will receive mentoring through college and well into adulthood.

"We're going to follow them, not only at Mercy and college but in their entire career," Speranza said. "We want to open doors for them everywhere they go."

Mercy will be working with the Rochester City School District and other districts to identify and actively recruit students for the program.

"What we want to be able to do with Mercy is have our leadership team actually go into living rooms ... and talk to them about this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Speranza said.

When asked whether he thought RCSD would be willing to direct its most promising female students to a private school, he said: "There are tens of thousands of students in the City School District. We're looking for 11. ... I think if you can significantly change the lives of those 11, or 20 or 30 or 40 students, it would be a drop in the bucket for the school district."

About one in five current Mercy students are girls of color, Jensen said, while about one in three receive some scholarship money. Across Monroe County, non-white children make up 45 percent of the public school enrollment and 49 percent are considered economically disadvantaged, with the lion's share coming from the city of Rochester.

If the program is successful, Speranza said that he intends to continue funding a class of 10 or more ninth-graders each fall, resulting in 40 or more girls at the school on a full scholarship. The Speranza family already supports the school's Scholarship of Hope, founded in 1989.

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Many of the specifics of the program have yet to be fleshed out; Mercy is hiring a director and a youth advocate and wants those people to have a hand in developing the curriculum and other pieces. Speranza also said he hopes community