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Urban Prep's signing day: It is a big deal

All 107 seniors in school's 1st graduating class announce which college they will attend in fall

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From left, Israel Wilson, Edward Green, Andrew Mesadiou and Lavince Person recite Urban Prep's creed at signing day activities Tuesday at Harry Caray's restaurant in Chicago. (Tribune photo by José M. Osorio)

Urban Prep is big on ritual.

Every time one of the high school's seniors gained college acceptance, he swapped out his red tie for a striped red-and-gold one—until an electrifying day in March, when all 107 seniors of Englewood's Urban Prep Academy for Young Men donned striped ties.

Today, they established another tradition.

The students, in their trademark uniform blazers and ties, publically announced where they would attend college. For the first graduating class

of Chicago's only public all-male, all-African-American charter high, the declaration was monumental. Many of the students at the school, which is in one the city's roughest neighborhoods, are the first in their family to go to college. Only 4 percent of them read at grade level when they started four years ago, school officials said.

The event was designed to mimic the annual signing day where student-athletes commit to a college team. Seniors rattled off the names of the schools where they were

accepted—some as many as 10—then announced the one they had chosen and put on a hat from their future school.

Keith Greer, fearful he'd mess up his hair, hesitated for a moment before he put on his Southern Illinois University cap. He remembers when his grades were so low his freshman year that people told him college was not a feasible option.

"I'm greater than what people said I was," he said after mashing his curls. "I stuck it out."

When Gerald Jackson was a kid, he dreamed of a signing day when he would announce his basketball skills to the world. But the future Howard University student realized scholarship outweighed athletics.

"It's a big, big day," he said as he grinned uncontrollably.

But the students, who have to pass bullet-riddled windows and metal detectors before they begin their academically rigorous school day, are the first to admit their journey is far from over.

"I know there are going to be obstacles, but it's up to me to overcome them," said Lavince Person, who decided on Tuskegee University



The Nike Urban Prep shoe.

after learning in class about its first president, Booker T. Washington.

His biggest worry is monetary, but like every other student in his class, he has completed his Free Application for Federal Student Aid, and Person hopes to participate in a work-study program once he gets to Alabama.

In total, the students were accepted to more than 100 schools, including Northwestern University, Georgetown University, Indiana State University and University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Representatives from some of those schools, as well as former Bear and Urban Prep board member Chris Zorich, also attended the event at Harry Caray's.

Nike commemorated the accomplishment with a limited-edition Urban Prep shoe. When a representative unveiled a prototype of the sneaker—complete with the school's creed written on the insole and two pairs of shoelaces, one red and the other red-and-gold striped—the room erupted in applause and students rushed to the podium with cell phones and digital cameras.

"I'm not going to wear it," Person said. "I'm going to cherish it."

Each student will receive a pair of sneakers, but not before they graduate and meet with school officials in the summer—hopefully with train, bus or plane tickets to college in hand.

"It's another carrot we're dangling in front of them," said the school's CEO, Tim King, who donned a "100 percent" T-shirt over his crisp white button-down.

The school will stay in touch with the students in hopes of getting them to finish what they started at Urban Prep, King said.

"This is the next step in the transition," King said. "Graduating high school is not a big deal. Getting into college is not a big deal. Finishing college—that's a big deal."

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TOP Urban Prep's future Fighting Illini Cameron Barnes, Jerry Hinds and Esko Peterson at Signing Day with Karina Padilla from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
BOTTOM Gregory Sashington signs Urban Prep's Credimus Book



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