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Hoop Dreams Comes To the End of Its Run

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Nonprofit a Victim of Soured Economy

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Susie Kay, a white teacher at the District's H.D. Woodson High School, stood 5-foot-2 but had big dreams for her mostly black students: She wanted them to go to college. What is more, she made it happen.

She founded Hoop Dreams, which over the past 13 years has distributed millions of dollars in college scholarships and helped about 1,000 D.C. students go to college and realize their own dreams.

But on Monday, the board of the nonprofit organization decided that it would be necessary to shut down operations at the end of this year.

"It is with a heavy, humbled and very grateful heart that I let you know that we have made the very difficult decision to bring the operations of the Hoop Dreams Scholarship Fund to a planned close," Kay, 44, said in a news release.

She said the decision to halt operations came after much "thoughtful deliberation and analysis."

She said that officials at Hoop Dreams had become deeply concerned over the past few years about the economic climate and the organization's ability to raise funds and continue supporting students.

Moreover, she said, downsizing was not an option for the group. To eliminate certain programs would "drastically alter" the basic structure of the organization.

However, she said, the group would continue operations through the fall, and would remain "a support system," although in a reduced capacity.

The group had enough funding to meet all existing obligations, her statement said. Students who recently completed high school would receive their full 2009-2010 scholarships, and students currently in college who received renewal scholarships would also get their full awards, the statement said.

But, she said, the bottom line was bleak: "What we cannot do . . . is promise scholarship dollars beyond the 2009-2010" school year.

The decision appears to end the dream of a woman known for the size of her heart, who struggled to bridge two worlds and show that there was more to Southeast Washington, where she taught, than poverty, violence and despair.

"She broke down those stereotypes, she eliminated those myths," said Theodore Brannum, 28, a former beneficiary of the program who is Hoop Dreams' program director. "She would do everything she could, not

only to make sure that the students could learn but that other people could learn from the students."

Hoop Dreams started in 1996 as a one-day charity basketball fundraiser that took in \$3,000. Over the years, it grew rapidly.

One of those who symbolized the program is Lester Davis, 26, who was about to embark on his senior year at Woodson when he found himself under Kay's wing.

Until then, he said, he was a below-average student. But Kay hooked him up with an internship that summer at Edelman Public Relations, a top-ranked firm, he said.

"I said at the time, 'Here's a woman who, in reality, probably shouldn't have that much faith in me,'" Davis said. "But she was saying, 'Not only do I have faith in you, but you're going to make me proud.'"

Davis went on to graduate from Rutgers University, the first in his family to obtain a college degree. He is now Hoop Dreams' director of communications.

When asked what was next for her, Kay said: "I haven't really had a moment to just pour myself into this. I wish I had a really wonderful answer, but I don't. I just want to make sure it ends the same way it started."

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