

'We need to create the right opportunities'

Amber Scott '07
NEUROSCIENCE MAJOR

This past fall, Amber Scott '07, who witnessed firsthand how college can lift entire families out of poverty, launched Leap Year, a yearlong Atlanta-based program designed to help first-generation prospective college students prepare for the rigors of higher education. Her pilot project has already made good on its promise to make college a reality for its first class of young people.

A study abroad program changed everything. "I started as a pre-veterinary student at Smith, and I spent a summer abroad in Kenya studying wildlife management. There, I learned about how climate change was affecting animals—and people. There was actually violence breaking out because of water shortages. I came back to America thinking: How is it that there are people in the world who are fighting and dying over a lack of water?"

So she found an outlet. "That same year, a new national program called 100 Projects for Peace launched, which awards students across the country \$10,000 to create a project that promotes peace. I got a grant to build two wells for neighboring tribes in Kenya to help prevent the violence that was happening because of the water shortages."

The project taught her to think bigger. "I had a moment during that experience when I realized: 'I don't just have to care about issues from the sidelines. I can take an idea, turn it into reality and make an impact.' I knew that this was what I wanted to do with my whole

life: to try to find solutions to tough social issues."

That idea, combined with her family history, helped her see opportunity. "I am the product of two first-generation college students. My grandparents grew up poor on farms in Arkansas, then moved to Flint, Mich. My parents—who got college educations and built great careers—moved to a good Boston suburb. I had so many opportunities because of that. I saw in my own life the way that a college education could help move a family out of poverty. But it's not easy, and we don't always give first-generation kids every opportunity to succeed."

That led to Leap Year. "Leap Year is designed for first-generation students from low-income high schools in Atlanta. We know, for example, that they tend to be less prepared to succeed in college. They don't have parents who can help them navigate financial aid forms, like FAFSA, or who can

help them select a college that will really support them. These students sometimes feel like they don't 'belong' on a college campus. So we spend a year with them to help them get ready. Half the time is working on academics, learning better note-taking, public speaking and gaining confidence. The rest of their time is spent on community service."

The program is starting small, but the ambition is big. "With the help of generous donations, we started our first program last fall with three students. By January, all were enrolled in college. Next year, we hope to have funding from AmeriCorps, which will allow us to expand to 15 or 20 students. But our aim is much higher: We hope someday to make it a national program. Right now, we know that only one in 10 low-income students will graduate from college across the country. They have so much potential. We just need to give them the right opportunities."

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