

Southie survivor : Susan Ulrich told herself she could do better - and then did

By Dennis Nealon



Susan Ulrich and TYP Director Thompson "Tony" Williams

It is written on her young Irish face.

Susan Ulrich has the streetwise look of someone who's seen more than enough grief and hopelessness in her native South Boston. The Brandeis junior has fought a teen suicide "crisis" in "Southie" and more than once battled a peer's downward spiral to drug addiction and death.

But Ulrich says she sees the light and the dark sides of life - the good and the bad. And she's looking ahead to a fulfilling future after she graduates from Brandeis this coming December (2002). She says that future likely will include staying close to the people in Southie and helping there when she can, as she's done for many years already. Five years ago when six teens killed themselves in a rash of suicides, Ulrich, her parents and eight other young people organized Southie Survivors, and lead a group of 300 kids in a solidarity march to Boston City Hall.

Talk to her now and you realize that she has persevered and even excelled mostly because of her own thick skin and family support. But Ulrich says the opportunities she's had at Brandeis, first as a student in the Transitional Year Program and then as a regular undergraduate, have helped to keep her hopeful.

Southie, where Ulrich grew up the youngest of eight children, is itself a paradox. As Ulrich explains, it is a place barely clinging to the old ways. It is a place both loved and despised by its denizens. On one hand you've got neighborhoods of two-family houses and apartment buildings where people look out for each other, where if you need help you can go to a neighbor's and find it.

Like many things about Southie, however, that tradition is fading as the community becomes more diverse and higher rents scatter and threaten to uproot longtime residents.

One constant, says Ulrich, is the pervading sense by too many young people that it's easier to "numb out" on drugs or just quit hoping altogether. She says many kids in the neighborhoods have become desensitized to alcohol, drugs, crime and death. There is an ongoing, "absolute heroin epidemic," according to Ulrich, and the area is burdened by emotional aftershocks from the forced-busing debacle of the 1970s.

According to Ulrich, many teens in Southie drop out of high school. Some earn their GEDs. But few envision higher education in their futures.

The daughter of a business consultant and a former day care operator who "raised the whole neighborhood," Ulrich attended Catholic schools for 14 years, including Fontbonne Academy in Milton, Mass. But she says it wasn't until she was accepted into

the TYP at Brandeis that she realized she hadn't been working or learning to her potential.

"TYP has been one of the strongest influences in my life," she said. "I thank God everyday that I was given the opportunity to do that, because it did change my life in a lot of ways.

Begun in the 1960s, the TYP is a span between high school and college for less advantaged students who show potential to pursue higher education but need assistance preparing for the rigors of getting into a college or university and succeeding once they get there. Like Ulrich, some TYP students get accepted at Brandeis.

The vast majority of students who complete TYP go on to earn their undergraduate degrees. Most also credit TYP Director Thompson "Tony" Williams for their success. "Professor Williams," says Ulrich, "obviously is a person who's completely dedicated to the program and to us."

At Brandeis Ulrich is majoring in Politics and American Studies. She has been accepted as a coexistence fellow at Brandeis's International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life. At the end of May she heads for Ireland for nine weeks to work at a YMCA on an anti-drugs program.

Once she graduates, Ulrich plans to go on to graduate school and may pursue an MBA. Ultimately she sees herself involved in community service at least part-time.
