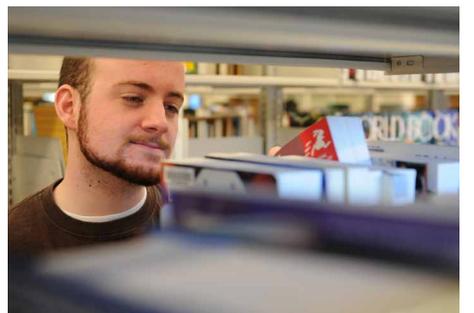




# Fast Track

Graduates of Ohio's Early College High Schools set a pace for early success

Excerpt:  
Adairia





**Adairia Kelly**

**Graduate** of Dayton Early College Academy.  
**Attending** Miami University, studying social work.

## Overcoming personal tragedy to help others

Adairia Kelly says that when people look at her, they don't realize everything she's been through.

It's no wonder. With her self-assured manner and high-wattage smile, Kelly seems like someone who is sailing through life. Hearing this Miami University student speak about her first appearance on the Dean's List or her plans to attend graduate school and enter social work only confirms the impression that Kelly has always been a student destined for success.

But Kelly's confidence and accomplishments hide a much more complicated truth. She has overcome enormous obstacles to reach this point.

The first pivotal moment came when Kelly enrolled in a new and demanding high school and had to learn to develop academic independence and concrete study habits for the first time in her educational life.

The second was when back-to-back losses — the death of her maternal grandmother, followed by the murder of the little brother she helped raise — threatened to derail the college career she'd worked so hard to earn.

In both cases, caring educators and an innovative program that harnessed Kelly's intelligence and drive played a crucial role in helping her develop the skills to become an

accomplished college student and to stay resilient in the face of devastating personal loss.

Born when her mother was 14 and her father 16, Kelly spent a lot of time as a young girl taking care of three younger siblings. By the time she moved from her mother's to her paternal grandmother's care when she was 12, she'd missed out on a great deal of her childhood.

With Kelly's difficult personal history and the fact that her schools were part of a financially struggling urban district, her grandmother, Mary Pounds, felt Kelly's education was suffering. "I felt that a foundation was not being built," she said.

So when Pounds heard about a new school where students could attend college classes while in high school she knew it could be the chance Kelly needed. The Dayton Early College Academy (DECA) promised a personalized education, rigorous standards and a financial and academic jumpstart that, with hard work, could help students earn an associate's degree at the same time as a high school diploma.

But Kelly had her doubts about being in the first class at a new school. "It felt like we were going to be guinea pigs," she said.

Her first few weeks there didn't reassure her. Kelly found herself on the University of Dayton campus at age 14. Compared to her experiences in urban Dayton elementary and middle schools, almost nothing about DECA felt familiar. "It was so new, I just had to adjust."

But between DECA's teachers and advisers, she got more help adjusting to the new ways of college than she would have anticipated.

"It was just one supportive environment. I had never been in a school where just everyone cared," Kelly said. "No one expected less of you. And they were never afraid to check you and let you know that you need to get yourself together."

To DECA's staff, Kelly appeared articulate and magnetic – qualities that could help her soar through the early college experience, but that also threatened to trip her up in the up-and-down, sometimes toxic social culture of high school.

"I think I met Adairia a few days into the school year when she was with a few of her friends," said Danya Berry,

the YMCA with students from all over the city.

"I think then she realized how small her world was – she hadn't interacted with anyone outside of her neighborhood or community," Berry said. "When she started opening herself up to letting things happen to her and stopped worrying about looking cool, she opened herself up to many opportunities and she just blossomed."

While Kelly was a good student, she had help rising to the challenges of taking college courses.

"There was many a Saturday that teachers would sit up with my kid in my kitchen when she had exams on Monday. I appreciated that with all of my heart and soul," Pounds said.

DECA teachers' commitment to Kelly helped her build her own commitment to her education.

"As I got into the groove of things, I understood how hard I had to work and that I was in control of my learning," Kelly said. "And if I wanted to graduate at a certain time or learn something at a certain time, that I had to do it. My teachers were there to advise, not to hand things to me."

As Kelly visited college campuses, DECA staff began to prepare her for some of the realities

of college life that would still be new to her once she graduated.

"Even though they tell you that you are in charge of your own learning, they still understand that you are still in high school, and still technically a child," Kelly said. "They give you a little leeway, but they made me understand that 'when you get to college, it's not going to be like this, you're not going to have teachers letting you know that a deadline is coming up. You're going to be expected to know that through your syllabi."

Kelly left DECA with her high school diploma (she was the first person to achieve that on her mother's side of the family), along with 56 college credits and a full scholarship to Miami University.

One of the struggles of being the first generation to go to college is that family members may not understand the intensity of the workload simply because they haven't experienced it themselves.

"When I need help at Miami, I call Danya at DECA," Kelly said.



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DECA's student service coordinator and college liaison. "If there was some drama going on in the school, we could always guarantee that she was somewhere near it – her name came up every time there was some girl drama in her freshman and sophomore year."

Kelly's adviser and science teacher Melissa Reiger also saw a range of possibilities.

"From the beginning I could see potential in Adairia but I also saw that she was holding herself back," she said. "She could be stubborn or let her attitude get in the way. At the same time, I could see that she could question and think critically along with having great leadership skills. Most of all, when she found a passion in something, she would excel."

The staff looked for opportunities that would help broaden Kelly's worldview. Alongside her work, she did DECA's required 100 hours of community service, volunteering in soup kitchens and assisted living facilities for the elderly. During her junior year, she was given the chance to be part of Junior Leadership Dayton through

She would end up calling for help more than she could have imagined. In each of her first two years at Miami, Kelly experienced a profound personal loss. Her maternal grandmother died her freshman year. Then, when she was a sophomore, her younger brother was killed while waiting at a bus stop with his girlfriend. Stunned, and often torn between her new life and traumas at home, she struggled to keep her college life on track.

“I never thought I would experience something like that – I never thought anyone would kill my brother. He wasn’t in the whole gang scene,” she said.

Recovering from that loss has been very difficult. “I still find myself taking it really hard. It’s really hard to not let other people see me hurt,” Kelly said. She is especially careful of her two younger sisters, who she brings to Miami in hopes that they will see themselves in college one day too. In a recent school project about hopes and dreams, one of them chose Kelly as the person who inspired her most.

Kelly’s grandmother and her friends at DECA were determined to keep her moving forward.

“I told her this happens in life, things happen in life, people live and die every day – you grieve, you feel pity for yourself but you get up and move on,” said Pounds. “I think out of that whole process, she might have missed one day of school. We didn’t come this far to fail now.”

Kelly responded by pushing her academic life forward

and finding new ways to be part of the Miami community. Now a member of a sorority for African American women that does a great deal of community service, Kelly said, “I just try to contribute to the campus a lot more than I did before,” she said.

Originally a communications major, she changed direction when she took a career exploration course and discovered that her financial prospects were as strong in social work. She plans to finish her undergraduate work in 2011 and get a master’s degree before hitting the job market.

“I would like to be the director of an agency that makes decisions on taking children out of homes that are not fit for them. I would also like to start my own non-profit organization for young girls, homeless girls or troubled teenagers. Or I could be a high school counselor.”

In addition to her course load, she works three jobs – in Miami’s Office of Equity and Equal Opportunity, the campus library and as a resident adviser. She also does community service work at a safe home for homeless girls and regularly meets with teenage girls from Cincinnati to talk to them about planning for college. She helps them with practical things, like entrance letters, as well as the harder, less tangible things, like growing their self-esteem and confidence.

“I try to let them know that if you work hard, you can do anything you want to do,” Kelly said.

– Tracy Zollinger Turner

## Early College High Schools in Ohio

Across Ohio, early college high schools are changing what it means to be a college student. These schools take the young teenagers who are least likely to attend college and most likely to be performing below grade level, then put them in an atmosphere with high levels of support and high expectations. They allow students to start taking college courses in grade 9 or 10 and earn up to 60 hours of college credit by the time they graduate from high school.

The nine Ohio Early College High Schools in the KnowledgeWorks network are showing remarkable results. They report an average graduation rate of 91 percent and more than one in three ECHS students graduate with a high school diploma and two years of college credit or an associate’s degree. Others earn substantial college credits that speed their journey toward a degree.

More than 90 percent of ECHS 10th graders scored proficient or higher on the Ohio Graduation Test in reading, writing, mathematics and social studies, outperform-

ing the state average. Greater percentages of students from ECHS schools scored accelerated or advanced on Ohio state achievement tests than students at comparable high schools, suggesting that they are more college ready.

What happens when these young adults – almost all of them the first in their families to attend college or students who likely would not continue their education without the boost of ECHS – move beyond the carefully structured and nurturing environments of their high schools? Research shows that they are more likely to enroll in and complete college.

But research data is only part of the answer. Each of the remarkable young adults who has graduated from an Early College High School has a unique story of accomplishment and challenge. Each has a dream as individual as his or her journey. To learn more about early college high schools or meet other ECHS alumni, please go to [www.OhioEducationMatters.org](http://www.OhioEducationMatters.org).