

### ***2013 NEOA RISING STAR ~ Mia Midenjak***



*Mia Midenjak participated in TRIO through Upward Bound (UB) at the University of Vermont in 2000-2003. The UB Director then was Nancy Boldt. Mia was nominated by its current UB Director, Elaine Leavitt.*

In May of 1999, at the age of fourteen, I was resettled in Burlington, Vermont, as a refugee from the former Yugoslavia. The war in our country displaced many people from their homes, including my own family, and destroyed the economy; as a result, we had few prospects for employment or a better life. When we learned in 1999 that we would be moving permanently to the U.S., we felt like we had won the lottery. I had

heard from family friends that in America, unlike in my own country, it was possible to succeed in life through education and personal merit. I was determined to at least try.

I entered 9<sup>th</sup> grade in the fall of 1999, and received a letter one day before the winter holidays inviting me to participate in Upward Bound, a program that helps high school students prepare for college. Neither of my parents had gone to college, and I wanted to be the first person in my family to receive a college diploma. I therefore jumped on the chance to participate in a program that could help me achieve that goal. I was a regular Upward Bound program participant during all four years of high school, and I can confidently say that it has been one of the most positive influences in my life.

Over the course of four years, Upward Bound engaged me in activities that I otherwise never would have been able to afford, such as taking an SAT prep class, visiting colleges, or going on field trips around Vermont to hike and learn about the environment. Coming from a low-income, non-English speaking family that had just moved to the U.S. and was still dealing with culture shock, these things were far out of my reach. In that respect, Upward Bound significantly broadened my horizons. One of the most meaningful experiences I had while attending Upward Bound was visiting colleges, such as Pace University, NYU, Columbia, and Harvard during the summer after my sophomore year of high school. Walking through the campuses of these universities and speaking with their students made my dream of going to college seem much more real.

In addition to these activities, Upward Bound's coordinators met with me individually on a regular basis to discuss my academic progress and college plans. It meant a lot to me and my family that other people cared enough about my future to invest so much time in me. Today, ten years later, I am a graduate of Harvard College and the Boston University School of Law. In retrospect, I believe that a lot of my academic success can be tied directly to my participation in Upward Bound, without which I would have been significantly less prepared for the challenging journey through higher education. Especially for students like me who come from families where no one has ever gone to college, Upward Bound played a very important role in envisioning and realizing a brighter future for myself.