In 1990, Joe Fisher, B.A. 1975, knocked on approximately 300 doors in a low-income housing community in Laurel, Md. His message was simple and direct: “I am here to help your kids get into college,” he told those who answered the door. Many were skeptical.

“They thought I was a minister or they wouldn’t answer the door,” Fisher says. “Some people told me their kids weren’t ready yet for college. I told them, ‘That’s okay, I’ll be back.’”

Twenty-five years later, his determination has paid off. Fisher, who is the head women’s cross country and track and field coach at Catholic University, is celebrating a milestone with his nonprofit organization First Generation College Bound. With his help, more than 2,000 low- to moderate-income students from Prince George’s County, Md., have gone to college. More than 500 have graduated from college since 1990, and over 600 are currently enrolled.

In recognition of his work with First Generation College Bound, Fisher was presented with the Smathers Award during Athletics’ annual athletics hall of fame induction dinner. He is one of 30 students from Prince George’s County, Md., who matriculated into college. Fisher was one of 30 students to attend Catholic University. The Partnership Program provided academic support and student services to those enrolled in the program.

“If it wasn’t for the Partnership Program, I wouldn’t have been given the opportunity to go to Catholic University,” Fisher says. “I’ll be indebted to CUA the rest of my life.”

As a student-athlete at CUA, Fisher excelled. He was an NCAA All-American in 1973 and 1975 and he earned his bachelor’s degree in education in 1975. He went on to earn a master’s degree in urban education from Morgan State University.

After graduation, he became a middle school teacher in Howard County, Md. There he saw a need he thought he could fill based on his life experiences. “I learned there wasn’t a long-term commitment in the public school system to really help low-income students go to college,” he explains. “Low-income kids wanted to go to college. It was just that they lacked the encouragement and resources to find out how they could go to college.”

Fisher’s help comes in multiple ways. First of all, he says he focuses on what he calls “attitude management.” He wants to make sure the students in his program have a mindset that college is an option. His mother and father just wanted their eight children to complete high school, something his parents never did. (His mother did complete her GED at the age of 52.) It wasn’t until he started running track that he realized his athleticism could pave the way to a spot on a college track team.

Fisher’s high school track coach, Hubert Gates, introduced him to Jerry McGee, Catholic University’s track and field head coach.

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Fisher was able to enroll at Catholic University with the help of the Partnership Program, a minority scholarship program founded by Thaddeus Aubry and Leon LeBuffe that began in 1969 to benefit promising young students from the Washington, D.C., area. Fisher was one of 30 students to attend Catholic University. The Partnership Program provided academic support and student services to those enrolled in the program.

Fisher understands the students he mentors. Growing up in a low-income housing community in Laurel, Md., he saw a need he thought he could fill based on his own life experiences. “I learned there wasn’t a long-term commitment in the public school system to really help low-income students go to college,” he explains. “Low-income kids wanted to go to college. It was just that they lacked the encouragement and resources to find out how they could go to college.”

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