Jonathon Brown said the death of his father when he was a junior in high school was a “spiraling moment” that left his family struggling. The hard times followed him to Massachusetts Institute of Technology, when he had no parents to check in with him every so often. “I was doing well academically,” he said, “but I wasn’t always sleeping regularly or eating right. You can’t survive on ramen noodles and Pop-Tarts every day.”

And then, last December, someone in MIT’s student support services department put the junior studying astrophysics in touch with The Wily Network, a Dedham-based nonprofit that helps students who are homeless, have aged out of foster care or for other reasons lack a permanent family navigate their way through college. “At first, I was skeptical; to me, it sounded too good to be true,” he said. “But this network of people I can rely on and trust has helped me feel like I could get through MIT when I had doubts.”

Brown, 20, a native of Michigan, is on a full scholarship to the Cambridge college. He still worries if his two sisters and mom back home have enough to eat. “Today, the Wily Network provides Brown and 18 other students at colleges throughout the region with the kind of financial and emotional support that most other young adults take for granted. Its students often have scholarships but not always food plans or spending money at the colleges they attend. So the network gives each of them a computer and a $150 monthly stipend, which they can use to buy food, go to the movies or send money home, if they have one.

Its staff, who are on-call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, also helps students buy books and clothes, pays up to $50 per month so that each of them can have a smartphone and helps them make plans to celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas. And the network provides students with coaches — trained social workers — who meet with them weekly to address any other needs that might come up.

Judi King, who founded the group in 2014 and heads a staff of a half-dozen part-timers, named it The Wily Network as a tribute to how determined its charges need to be just to get into college and then to succeed once they’re there. “You need tunnel vision to do that when the world is crashing around you,” King said. “Our students are really teetering on the edge at all times.”

Northeastern University alone found 30 of its students in need of the kind of help The Wily Network offers — far more than the group currently is able to help because the bulk of its money comes from individual donations made by people who’ve heard about the organization through word of mouth.

But to King and students like Brown, that money has the potential to pay lasting dividends. “For most of our students, if they drop out of college, they’re going to be homeless and on public assistance,” she said. “Hopefully, we can provide a safety net to help them hang on.”

To find out more, visit www.thewilynet.org, email info@thewilynet.org, or call 781-355-6527.