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Friendly High senior gets full ride to California school

Financial burden eased for Fort Washington student who helped support family

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by Natalie McGill | Staff Writer

With his family home in Fort Washington in foreclosure and both parents jobless, college was a distant light at the end of the tunnel in 2009 for Rafaello Sampang.

But the light still burned brightly, and the senior at Friendly High School in Fort Washington, who picked up a job at IHOP to support his family, was determined to make it to college.

A guidance counselor noticed that determination and nominated Sampang, 18, for the Posse Scholarship, a four-year, full-ride scholarship to one of six Posse schools nationwide for Washington, D.C., metropolitan-area students. After walking the Show Place Arena stage June 3 for his graduation from Friendly High, Sampang will attend Pepperdine University in Malibu, Calif., this fall.

The scholarship is given through The Posse Foundation, a New York City-based organization which identifies a diverse group of student leaders who excel academically but because of test scores could get shut out of their choice colleges.

Sampang's mother lost her job as a day care worker and his stepfather lost his as a computer engineer contractor in the transition between junior and senior year. He decided to drop two Advanced Placement courses from his course load to work five days a week at an Oxon Hill IHOP to help support his family, sometimes working graveyard shifts from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. and coming to school on one to two hours of sleep.

"It was very exhausting," Sampang said. "Even though I still had to work those hours, I had responsibilities for my senior year. I had responsibility to my tennis team."

Powered by bottles of caffeine drinks and cups of coffee, Sampang said one of his motivations to succeed was his 10-year-old brother Victor.



Christopher Anderson/The Gazette
Rafaello Sampang, 18, of Fort Washington graduated June 3 from Fort Washington's Friendly High School.

"I wanted to show him that basically though our family is down and out, that you can still achieve," Sampang said. "I was going to work hard and I knew someone was going to notice."

Friendly High guidance counselor Kennetra Wood did notice, and nominated Sampang for the Posse Scholarship. He was one of 10 Friendly students interviewed and one of two who received scholarships in December 2009. Friendly senior Kristopher Hibler-Smith will also join Sampang at Pepperdine this fall. Ten students countywide received Posse scholarships.

Tuition for four years at Pepperdine would have cost Sampang \$140,000, he said.

"It was a good Christmas gift," Sampang said.

Sampang said he wants to major in mathematics education at Pepperdine to give back to the teachers he said have come to cheer him on in his tennis matches and offer emotional guidance when he needed it the most.

"I felt as if the biggest strength I got was from my teachers," Sampang said.

Anya Plana-Hutt, Sampang's tennis coach and a Friendly High Community Referenced Instruction teacher for Friendly's mentally disabled students, said Sampang is like a son to her. She said he was always eager to run for offices in the clubs she sponsored, such as the Organization of International Cultures, where he was an editor for the group newsletter, "The Pangaea."

"As a teacher myself, I feel gratified that he wants to be a mentor to others because that's what he's been doing all along at school," Plana-Hutt said. "Teaching would be a good profession for him because he's a good mentor."

Sampang's parents, who were not available for comment by press time, have once again found work and are still working through the foreclosure process, but he said both are glad the burden of where he would go for college is lifted.

"They were relieved and happy that they don't have to worry about me going to college because I am going to college," Sampang said.