

Haitian students earn free pass to top colleges

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Written by Renee Michelle Harris

MIAMI — Gregory Almonord and Sabrina Debrosse knew college would be a part of their future.

How they would pay for it, though, was another story. Thanks to their selection as members of a highly successful college access program, money is no longer an issue: Each has earned scholarships worth up to \$200,000.

The nonprofit Posse Foundation grants full scholarships to students who can perform well at top-tier private colleges and universities, but who may not have been on the schools' radar.

As a result, Almonord and Debrosse, visual arts students at New World School of the Arts (NWSA) in Miami, will now be able to continue their exceptional study habits and work ethic without having to work their way through school.

"I have a couple of friends who did their first year of college, and they've had to come back just because of the financial strain and stress," said Debrosse, who emerged as a team leader through a Posse project building process that included writing Public Service Announcements.

She will attend Hamilton College, a private liberal arts school in Clinton, N.Y., that places a strong emphasis on teaching students to "write effectively, learn from each other and think for themselves," according to the school's web site.

"I think it's going to be a load off my shoulders," Debrosse said. "That way, I can focus, I can really get things done and I don't have to quit halfway [because of money.]"

Both 18 year-old students live in Miami, and are of Haitian descent. They said that their parents' work ethic and support were pivotal in their academic successes.

"My parents have done everything for me. They've gone above and beyond to make sure that I have everything that I can have and to make sure that I succeed and have a better life than they have had," Debrosse said.

Almonord agreed.

“Even though [my parents] don't have a college education, or even a high school education, they always made sure that I did my work,” said Almonord, who is ranked sixth in the NWSA's class of 2010.

The future surgeon will attend the University of Pennsylvania, and plans to make the most of his Ivy League collegiate experience.

“I plan on taking full advantage of all the resources that the school has for me,” he said. “They offer study abroad, they offer many club programs and opportunities to broaden my academic horizons.”

Frederic Conde, principal at NWSA, said the school's curriculum helps to prepare its students for success.

“The training in the arts offers students a different perspective to problem solving. Research shows that student thinking is not linear, and incorporates the more creative side of the brain,” Conde said.

The Miami Posse, the foundation's seventh site, partners with Hamilton, U. Penn. and Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, sending “posses” of ten to each school.

The students were selected from 800 people nominated across the country to participate in the program, which boasts a 90-percent college graduation rate. The national average is 57 percent.

The program's inclusive approach and phenomenal success rate helped make it one of only 10 organizations selected by President Barack Obama to receive a portion of the president's \$1.4 million Nobel Peace Prize award money.

Established in 1989 by Debra Bial, the Posse Foundation ensures that student participants arrive at college with a ready-made support group, or “posse.” Students are nominated by teachers and school counselors.

The posse selection process begins in September, and uses an evaluation method that allows Posse staff an opportunity to observe firsthand the students' intrinsic leadership abilities, their skill at working in a team setting, and their motivation and desire to succeed.

Although they do not begin classes until the fall, Almonord and Debrosse have already begun bonding with fellow posse members, and developing their leadership skills through the program's weekly pre-collegiate sessions and contact with their colleges.

The process has already had an impact on Debrosse, who plans to become a foreign diplomat.

“I sat in on one of the classes during my visit and they're very small, the teacher's very attentive, they know all of the students' names,” she said.

Almonord and Debrosse said their experience at New World has more than prepared them to succeed at college. Both said that they have already conquered one common college challenge: procrastination.

“Going to New World has definitely helped my work ethic. I work non-stop, and I learned not to procrastinate at all,” Debrosse said.

Almonord added: “At New World, we're given so much work, if you procrastinate, you'll be so far behind you won't be able to catch up. Once I start an assignment, I make sure I finish it.”