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Church helps students strike gold on scholarship search

By Eric Stirgus

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The \$3,000 their church raised for the college scholarships was nice, but Mychal and Nina Wynn thought it could do more.

In 2007, the couple approached Turner Chapel AME Church senior pastor, the Rev. Kenneth Marcus, with the idea of a ministry to help students search for other scholarships and, just as importantly, provide them with the skills to get those scholarships.

On Sunday the church, in Marietta, held a service for 50 church members who have been awarded scholarships. The offers totaled \$4.3 million.

Some students, like Brittany White, have earned full scholarships. White earned a Gates Millennium scholarship, which pays the entire tuition to any school the recipient attends. White's choice was Spelman College.

"It feels really great knowing they want me to succeed as much as I want to succeed," said White, 18.

Most of the students attend high schools in Cobb and Marietta, but some have graduated from schools in Cherokee, Fulton, Gwinnett, Paulding counties and Atlanta.

Community organizations and houses of worship across Georgia are getting more involved in helping aspiring college students find scholarships. Few, though, are as involved or successful as Turner Chapel AME, observers say.

Dr. Emily Lembeck, superintendent of Marietta City Schools, said, "I always enjoy attending this special service at Turner Chapel, where the number of graduates recognized continues to grow each year. This year MHS had a record number of graduates earning the largest amount of scholarship funds ever and I appreciate the contribution to this success that stems from the support some of our students received from the Education Ministry."

At Turner Chapel AME, the Wynns, youth pastor Rev. Don Ezell and others worked with student members to find scholarships that fit their academic interests. They also helped with resume and essay writing, tutoring and preparing for the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test. The church also holds a college fair each October. Last year, about 50 colleges came, said Mychal Wynn.

Reginald Lyon, president of the Duke Black Alumni Connection, which has about 1,500 members nationwide, attended the fair and was astounded by the preparedness of the students and workshops the church had on financial aid, college interviews and other topics.

"This was the most impressive setup I've seen at a historically black church," said Lyon, who lives in Dallas, Texas.

The church began in the mid 19th century. It has about 6,000 members.

Like Jesus urging his disciples to follow him and vowing to make them fishers of men, the Wynns have travelled to other churches to share what they are doing at Turner Chapel AME, with the inspirational message that they can do it too.

"We have created a scholarly culture and a culture of service," said Mychal Wynn.

That culture of service includes requiring church members in college to return on their breaks to help other students, or to mentor other Turner Chapel AME students once they arrive on campus. Many students are the first in their family to attend college and were unaware many of these scholarships exist. Some students say their guidance counselors, swamped with the hundreds of students seeking their attention, don't always have time to help.

Linette Andrea, whose daughter, Jordan Fessehaie, 17, will attend Boston University this fall, echoes the thoughts of many parents. A blessing, mom called it.

“Jordan had a clear vision of her goals since the tenth grade and working with the Wynns allowed both of us to be more focused and acquire information that was not at school or in the community,” Andrea said.

For Kyla Baron, 17, the long hours of prep work in the ministry have resulted in a full scholarship from Xavier University in New Orleans, where she wants to study biology. Barton, who graduated from Kennesaw Mountain High School, said she’s received other scholarships that will help her pay for books, her dorm room and transportation to school “so my parents don’t have to pay for that.”

About the Author



Eric Stirgus



Eric Stirgus joined The Atlanta Journal-Constitution in 2001. He is the newsroom's education editor. Born and raised in Brooklyn, N.Y., Eric is active in the Atlanta Association of Black Journalists and the Education Writers Association and enjoys mentoring aspiring journalists.

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