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A financial scholarship limited only by grades and hard work

Scott Nichols
news editor

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Scott Nichols/Review

Left, Pa Chia Thao. Right,
TreVon Alred

Who hasn't dreamt of winning the lottery, with the attendant quickened pulse quickly following the imagined revisions to one's lifestyle?

Now imagine being in 7th grade, and winning the lottery. Or, something that's not quite the lottery, but not so different, either.

Two St. Paul kids don't need to imagine this, as they've won what may well be the middle school version of a lottery: the chance to attend any school or get into any program their work ethic, test scores and grades allow.

Henceforth, money is no barrier for whatever kind of education is dreamt up by 13-year-olds TreVon Alred, of Burr Street, and Pa Chia Thao, of Mt. Airy homes.

Out of more than 1,000 applicants nationwide, the two St. Paul public school students - Thao goes to Ramsey Junior High and Alred goes to Murray Junior High - were among the 75 students nationwide to be awarded the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation's Young Scholars award.

And now they both have nearly unlimited financial support - to the tune of \$500,000, in a few past cases - for such things as summer programs, distance learning courses, music and art instruction, and, of course, tuition for any high school, college, graduate or post-graduate degree that accepts them.

Only one Minnesota student has ever won the Virginia foundation's eight-year-old scholarship before. And this student - as well as Alred and Thao - have belonged to Breakthrough St. Paul, the St. Paul School District/Mounds Park Academy program to nurture talent in high-potential middle-school students from low-income families.

Tickled pink that not just one but two local students could win such a prestigious award is Jeff Ochs, executive director of Breakthrough St. Paul.

"What they basically say is, when you win in 8th grade, you receive an open-ended amount of money to provide your dreams," says Ochs. "It's one of the most generous and flexible scholarships in the country."

But if there are two kids out there that deserve it, he says, it's kids like Alred and Thao who are "really motivated but are underresourced."

Talk to the kids, and you'll discover some of what Ochs talks about: not only are they motivated, but they have already put quite a bit of thought into what they want to be when they grow up.

Thao - who still has happy memories of her experiences in Farnsworth Aerospace Magnet Elementary School - credits that school for her desire to be an astronomer or engineer. Already, she is considering private high schools to attend: The Blake School, Breck, St. Paul Academy, or De LaSalle (especially if Alred goes there). This summer, she says, she expects to stay busy with camps and touring potential colleges.

Thao's two younger brothers still attend Farnsworth, while her two older brothers are at Arlington and Central high schools.

While some kids sandwiched between older and younger siblings might complain about never getting much attention from the parents, Thao is certainly not among them. She says her parents have always supported her - happily translating for father Xiong Thao when he tells her to mention to a reporter that "they are really proud of me. Whatever I want to do, they are always there to support me," says Thao.

Alred's mother is just as effusive.

"He is a great kid, so he definitely deserves it," says Caprice Alred of her son. Of course, she's a mom with some strict standards, which becomes clear when talking to her about TreVon, his sister and two cousins that Alred is also rearing.

"There's not one child that's not gifted in this house," she says. "I'd like to say it's his genes, but it's a lot of hard work."

And that hard work means lots of studying. Lots and lots.

"When doesn't he study?" she laughs, when asked about his homework. TreVon, she says, studies about four hours a night, not including music practice

for his spot in the Twin Cities Youth Band. "Bs or higher. That's the rule," she says.

Does it need mentioning that he wants to be a musician and music teacher?

TreVon not only plays the trumpet, but is teaching himself how to play guitar, too.

"His goals are bigger than I probably would have set up for him," says Alred, a phlebotomist "with no money."

Sure, she's had money for musical instruments and lessons for her son. But college tuition, perhaps at an elite private school? A master's degree, or Ph.D? Not really possible on mom's dime. Not with other children to also support.

Which is why, she says, TreVon's winning the scholarship was little different than "winning the lottery."

From the time her children have been in kindergarten, she says, she has told her all of her children that getting into college - not optional in her household - was only possible if they worked hard at their grades.

Which means, of course, it's quite gratifying for her to discover that her son has listened to her.

"I believe he deserves it and I believe he will work hard to keep it," says Caprice.

Thao, too, says she's ready for the road ahead - especially if it involves math or science.

"I think it's really hard and challenging, and I think I'm up for the challenge," she says.

She'd better be, because the Young Scholars awards aren't exactly a free ride. They have to be renewed each year, which means no slip-ups are allowed.

But Rebecca Stover, Young Scholars program manager, says the point isn't to be punitive. If an awardee faces academic or other trouble, her foundation will do its best to help.

"There is every effort to pay for tutoring, to pay for help along the way if the student is willing to make it work," she says.

Scott Nichols can be reached at (651)748-7816 or eastside@lillienews.com

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