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Two kids dare to dream of college; now, it'll be paid for

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MONDAY 12-1-2008

Homeroom > Ramsey and Murray junior high schools



Eighth-grader Pa Chia Thao, of Ramsey Junior High School, will be one of the first in her family to attend college, thanks to the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation Young Scholars award. She hopes to study engineering or astronomy in college. Her dream is to become an astronaut.



Eighth-grader TreVon Alred, of Murray Junior High School, was one of three students in the state to win the Young Scholars Award. He wants to focus on the arts. In addition to his schooling, the award will pay for private trumpet lessons for Alred next summer, which his family currently cannot afford.

PHOTOS COURTESY BREAKTHROUGH ST. PAUL

Eighth-graders picked for scholarship aid through college

By Emma L. Carew
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While college isn't even on the radar for most eighth-graders, it's been the No. 1 goal the last seven months for two students in the Breakthrough St. Paul program.

Pa Chia Thao, of Ramsey Junior High, and TreVon Alred, of Murray Junior High, will now get a lot of help to reach that goal. The 13-year-olds have been named Jack Kent Cooke Foundation Young Scholars, which means their educations from here on out will be fully funded.

Jeff Ochs, director of Breakthrough St. Paul, said only three Minnesotans, Thao and Alred included, have received the prestigious award, which has been given since 2000 to about 75 students each year. The other is Mounds Park Academy sophomore Tho Bui, who also applied a few years back through Breakthrough, a summer and Saturday-school program that helps motivated students lacking financial resources prepare for college.

The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, established when its billionaire namesake passed away in 2000, helps students from underprivileged backgrounds finance a top-notch education.

An immigrant from Thailand, Thao would be a first generation college student in her family. She would struggle to get there without the program, Thao said.

"I'm not a citizen from the U.S.," she said. "But that doesn't equal what I can achieve."

Thao hopes to study engineering or astronomy in college. Her dream is to become an astronaut.

Her parents, who speak little English and are new to the country, are supportive of Thao's education. Using her daughter as an interpreter, Dria Vang said she is happy for Thao. Vang did not get the chance to attend college when she lived in Laos.

Alred, meanwhile, wants to pursue a career in the arts.

"I really have a passion for music," he said. His goal is to become "a famous musician."

Most of Alred's friends don't

really know much about going to a university or worry about how they're going to pay for it, he said. When his cousin went to college in the fall, Alred said he watched the family try to raise money and look for scholarships.

Alred's mother, who didn't go to college, keeps him on track with his grades and school work, he said. And she helped him fill out the 30-page application for the Young Scholars award.

When he found out he had won, his mother "came home and literally danced."

Changes in Thao and Alred's education will start almost immediately. Both are working with educational advisers to decide where they should attend high school.

The award will also pay for private trumpet lessons for Alred next summer, which his family currently cannot afford.

Ochs described Thao and Alred as both being fairly soft-spoken. "It hasn't changed them. They're still who they are," he said. "They aren't boastful. ... It couldn't have happened to two better kids."