

Two Horatio Alger winners share their stories

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Jessica L. Stone and Christopher J. Bahamundi, two of the four Broward winners of the Horatio Alger National Scholarship, have both faced challenges and hardships while attending high school. Here's an idea of the qualities that helped them stand out.

Jessica, 19, a senior at Broward Virtual School, wants to be a librarian. She spends most of her time volunteering for the Broward College library, where she has taken four dual-enrollment classes. When she's not at school or reading, she helps her dad and grandma, both handicapped.

Jessica's dad, Mike, relies on a wheelchair to move around and can barely walk after an accident injured his back. Her grandma's health has deteriorated and she relies on her wheelchair to get around.

“Jessie is really good about helping around the house,” Stone said. “We barely make it month-to-month and we were filling out all sorts of scholarship applications, and that one we figured we might be lucky to get.

“Between grants and other scholarships, we're trying to do everything we can to make sure she goes to college, so when she got picked it was an outstanding moment. We were all very proud and I've been telling everybody about it.”

Jessica has been volunteering at the Broward College library for the past five years, going beyond the minimum volunteer service hours required for graduation.

Before winning the scholarship, college seemed unattainable. Hearing she won the scholarship was a life-changing moment.

“I was kind of shocked at first because I even forgot I had signed up for it,” said Jessica, who will attend Broward College. “I was so excited and my grandma was crying.”

Christopher has also helped his family go through tough challenges. For the past few years, he and three of his five siblings have lived at SOS Children's Villages, an organization that provides foster care to Broward children. His mother, Lorina, died five years ago.

“The first thing that came to my mind when I got the scholarship was my mom,” Christopher said. “She always pushed me and wanted me to do good in school and wanted the best of the world for me. She would be proud of me right now.”

Now 18, Christopher must pay rent at his foster home, but of the \$700 a month in rent he pays, the organization saves \$350 of it for him, he said. Without the scholarship that will now pay for his college education to fulfill his dream of becoming a lawyer, he doesn't know how he would have gone to college.

“The scholarship definitely guaranteed my college education because I already had problems paying rent, and I wasn't really too sure how I was going to do it,” he said. “Now I'll be using that.”

I'm the first one to go to college and I'm excited. My two little sisters were just jumping up and down and hugging me. They all said they were really proud of me."

Christopher has been accepted into the University of South Florida.

The winners also went on a four-day trip to Washington, D.C, to meet the other award recipients. It was the first time Jessica and Christopher had ever been to the Capitol.