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Scholarship Honors Hard-Luck Learners

Horatio Alger Prize Rewards Mettle

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More than 100 years after Horatio Alger's heyday as an author of rags-to-riches stories, something about his tales remains the essence of American idealism: the idea that with a lot of pluck and a little luck, even the poorest can attain middle-class security and happiness.

Alger's novels are not as popular as they were in the 19th century, but real-life stories of the same kind are honored in his name by the Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans, which gives one of the most unusual scholarships in the United States. The private award of \$20,000 for students toward college is an unusually large amount, and it differs from most scholarships because it is based largely on financial need.

Many of this year's 108 winners, who include Ivana Farrar of the District and Marquita Carter of Prince George's County, come from poor families, broken families or families with drug, abuse or alcohol problems. Many winners have lived in foster

care or worked jobs to support their families and, in some cases, their own children. Despite the burden, they want to attend college, and since 1984 the Horatio Alger Association in Alexandria has provided a helping hand.

The main criterion "is the financial need," said Julie Reames, director of program services and development for the association. She said the association looked for students in families with annual incomes less than \$50,000, and factored in the size of their family. "We have many, many students that are in foster care."

In Carter's case, her grandmother and the Air Force Junior ROTC program at Charles Herbert Flowers High School in Springdale, have picked up the parenting slack. Carter, 17, said her mother had problems with drugs, and she has had a difficult relationship with her father, who she said has been unemployed for the past three years.

With the encouragement of her grandmother — "She always told me to think big, think outside the box,

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never settle for less," Carter said — and JROTC instructors, who gave her food on days when she had nothing to eat, she has persevered, earning a 3.48 grade-point average in Flowers's challenging science and technology program.

She has been admitted to Virginia Tech, where she said she hopes to major in computer science; she also wants to become an Air Force officer to repay what JROTC has done for her. She said she would have had no way to pay for the education without having won the Alger award: "I couldn't have even gotten a loan, with my parents' credit," she said.

When she won the award, Carter said, "I cried. I just prayed. I was so elated."

Farrar, an 18-year-old senior at the Capitol Hill campus of the César Chávez Public Charter Schools for Public Policy, said her mother pushed her toward success. Her mother was inspired to send her daughter to César Chávez after seeing it recommended on Oprah Winfrey's television show. She also tolerates Farrar's pets: Butter the cat, Pisces the hamster and 8-Ball the snake.

An aspiring veterinarian, Farrar loves animals, but it was a human problem that nearly derailed her plan for college. Toward the end of 2006, Farrar became pregnant.

"My mom was really, really upset," she said. "I had to make some very



D.C. senior Ivana Farrar is among 108 winners of a Horatio Alger award, given to students who excel in school despite difficulties.

difficult decisions. I didn't want an abortion. But I knew that would get in the way of my future."

Farrar said she was a week away from having an abortion when she had a miscarriage.

"I guess it was God giving me a second chance," she said.

She said she emerged from the experience determined to go to college and turned her story into an essay she submitted for the Horatio Alger scholarship. She will attend the University of Maryland's Eastern Shore campus to study biology.

Farrar, Carter and 106 others will do "a little bit of everything" on a trip

to the District starting April 3, Reames said, including attending a ceremony at the Supreme Court, where they will speak with Justice Clarence Thomas. The students will also receive lessons on college readiness, Reames said.

Alexander Santiago, a 1992 Horatio Alger alumnus from Connecticut, recalled the trip to Washington as a life-changing event. Santiago grew up on welfare in Hartford, and in high school he was working to support his son. At that age, he hadn't seen what else life could offer.

"For me, that was the first time I had been outside of Hartford before," he said of the scholarship association trip. "I got a chance to meet a lot of young scholars like myself. I think just seeing their adversity, seeing what other people have to struggle with, realizing you're not alone, you're not the only person going through difficult circumstances... it was a pretty phenomenal experience."

Now, like one of Alger's literary heroes, he has reached a kind of promised land: the comfort of middle-class life in Montgomery County. He is a senior financial client manager for the Willis Group, where he does health-care consulting. He said he hopes this year's winners will follow the same path.

"A lot of these kids, they're just fighters," Santiago said. "The fact that they made it this far shows that they're all successes."