

The Virginian-Pilot

Scholarship is rewarding step on student's journey

Staci Dennis
May 11, 2008

A journey that began in Vietnam recently took Toan Do to the steps of the Supreme Court.

"I have gotten to do and see things that most people only dream of," said the Salem High School senior. "This is like a dream come true for my whole family."

Do, 18, was awarded the 2008 Horatio Alger National Scholarship, which is geared to students who have overcome adversity through perseverance and basic moral principles.

The nonprofit association was established in 1947 to dispel the notion that the American Dream was no longer attainable for today's youth, and the \$20,000 scholarship can be dispersed over five years to the college or university of Do's choice.

He and 107 other recipients were given an all-expense paid trip to Washington, D.C., where they met Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice and Clarence Thomas.

"It was nice to meet other people who had stories to share like mine," Do said. "I cried so many times listening to everyone's stories."

Do was born in Vietnam. His father, Thong Do, fought in the war against communism and was jailed when he tried to leave the country.

Do was 7 when he met his father for the first time. The family, which included his mother, father and sister, then moved to Virginia Beach.

"We all had to learn to speak English, adapt to a new culture and make life work," Do said. "It's been a hard journey, but worth it."

The family initially lived in one room until they saved up enough money to rent an apartment. Today, they own a house in Rock Creek.

"I am so proud of my son and all he has done," said his mother, Lien Phan. "I am very happy and thankful for this help. We couldn't have done it alone."

In addition to the Horatio Alger scholarship, Do was awarded the Gates Millennium Scholarship, the Sam Walton Community Scholarship, the Norfolk Foundation's Perry and Bunny Morgan Fund scholarship, the Elks National Foundation scholarship and the Virginia Cable Telecommunications Association-Donald A. Perry Foundation Virginia's Future Leaders scholarship.

"My goal was to have college paid for so my parents wouldn't have to worry about that," Do said. "I wanted to help take some stress off them."

Do is ranked second in his class and has a grade point average of 4.16. He is also in the Visual Performing Arts Academy at Salem where he is the founder and artistic director of the Academy Dance Company and president of the National Dance Honor Society.

Do hopes to attend an Ivy League school and major in biology and minor in dance. He'd like to go on to medical school and one day be an anesthesiologist.

"Eventually I would like to take what I learn and go back to Vietnam and run free clinics for people in need," he said. "Everything can come full circle."

Staci Dennis, sdennis@cox.net