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First Freedom Event A Treat for Students

By **Patty Kruszewski**

After two years with Partnership for the Future, Danielle Scott, Greg Morris, Jennifer Sayles and Nakiya Pitts are sold on the program.

The Highland Springs H.S. seniors did not need to meet a congressman, or a former U.S. secretary of state, to convince them they are part of something special.

But on Jan. 25, when they were invited to the First Freedom awards as guests of a business sponsor, they got to meet a couple of VIP's anyway.

Madeleine K. Albright, who was presented that night with the Distinguished Service Award by the Council for America's First Freedom, met with the students at a reception before the dinner. Getting his picture taken with the former secretary of state is one of the moments Morris will remember for a long time – along with the ambiance of the "Jefferson Hotel itself and the formality of the night."

Scott agrees that "dressing up, the aura, and just being there" were highlights, in addition to meeting Albright. But she, Pitts and Sayles thought meeting Congressman Bobby Scott was equally exciting

"In government," says Danielle Scott, "we just studied [elected officials] and watched a video about him."

"This is stuff you see on TV," Pitts says of the event, noting that the four honorees spoke of overcoming obstacles and coming from immigrant backgrounds. "It gave me inspiration – you see where they come from and what they've

done."

"To see what they went through," agrees Danielle, "it inspires you to keep pressing on."

How-To's for Life

Established in 1995 by Alan Kirshner, chair and CEO of Markel Corporation, PFF targets high school sophomores who have promise but limited resources, and envelops them in a three-year-long protective cocoon of mentorships, guidance and college tours.

Kirshner was inspired by Ron Suskind's story "Hope in the Unseen," which followed the difficult journey of a bright, motivated student from inner-city Washington, D.C. to college.

Determined that Richmond-area students would not be held back like the subject of the book, Kirshner enlisted three business sponsors and a dozen students to open his program. In addition to providing students with paid internships, the sponsors would encourage them to save their earnings by awarding a scholarship match upon completion of the program.

Today, PFF counts more than 80 businesses as sponsors, and the program boasts a 98 percent college entrance rate for students who complete the program. During the 2005-06 year, PFF served about 150 students from Metro Richmond high schools, including Highland Springs, Hermitage and Henrico.

"It's a wonderful program," says Sayles, who hopes to attend Virginia State University

or Old Dominion and major in business administration. She ticks off a list of helpful events, from panel discussions with college professors to personal development workshops focusing on communication, interviews, and etiquette (especially handy for the Jefferson dinner). Rising juniors also receive SAT prep, and rising seniors take bus trips to Virginia colleges.

"I've learned job skills and how to sell myself," says Pitts. "My mom is very appreciative too." In addition to occasional opportunities like the First Freedom dinner, parents get their own PFF classes, designed to help family members negotiate the maze of financial aid deadlines and college applications.

Another advantage of PFF, says Pitts, is the early boost it gives seniors in the college selection process.

"Last year we visited colleges, and this summer we had to write personal statements for colleges. So [by fall] we were all done," says Pitts, adding that PFF seniors could concentrate on studies and service instead of worrying about deadlines.

"PFF has guided me in almost every step of the college process," agrees Morris, who attends the Center for Engineering at HSHS and interns at Capital One Services, Inc. Morris plans to pursue undergraduate and graduate degrees in computer science.

VPs and VIPs

Although they devote many extra hours to PFF in ad-



Contributed photo

Highland Springs H.S. senior Danielle Scott poses with former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright during the First Freedom Awards Jan. 25.

dition to their schoolwork, students say the investment pays off socially as well as academically, as they've built relationships with other PFF students from around the area.

"We do fun stuff, too," adds Pitts. "Like the dodgeball tournament!" She and Scott share a smile as they reminisce about their experience with the team building exercise.

"When we went in," says Scott, "all the other teams were so competitive. We were like fresh meat!"

"We lost," says Pitts, "but we had so much fun." She plans to study broadcasting at James Madison University or University of Virginia and notes that a number of PFF grads appear headed to JMU – so they can anticipate seeing many familiar faces in Harrisonburg this fall.

Danielle Scott, who plans to attend JMU or George Mason and study graphic design, is quick to admit she's experienced an awakening since she first considered PFF.

"I'll be honest," Scott says, "I did not want to do the program. It's a commitment; there's a lot of work you put

into it. That first summer, I worked all summer [as an intern for Wyeth Pharmaceuticals], did book work and took classes at VCU.

"But – the opportunities!" she continues, accompanied by nods all around from her friends. "We get free college visits, and fee waivers. And if there's anything I've learned, it's networking. [At the Jefferson dinner] I gave out my business card!"

"I've met vice presidents of companies," Pitts chimes in, and pauses to relate comments from students outside PFF who envy her ability to mingle in the business world.

"If I wasn't in this program, I'd be envious too," Pitts says. "There are so many opportunities I wouldn't have had."

So, after a night at the Jefferson and a chance to meet with VIP's, would Pitts say she's feeling pretty lucky to be a part of PFF?

"Lucky?" muses Pitts.

"No, we are *blessed!*"