

## **Seventeen and set on being a doctor**

***With parents out of the pictures, others step in to help fund college***

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Monday, January 15, 2007

Every afternoon, high school senior Darryl Stephens leaves Richmond's Armstrong High School and heads to a cramped corner office in an old wing of VCU Medical Center.

There, he helps Dr. Wally Smith craft a grant proposal to fund research on sickle cell anemia.

"I just love being here," Stephens said. "It makes me feel like I'm where I want to be. Even if I was just transferring patients, I just want to work in a hospital."

Stephens, 17, dreams of becoming a pediatric neurosurgeon. And by all accounts, he has a dynamite academic record and is doing all the right things to stay on track for college and medical school.

"He doesn't have any negatives. His GPA is where it should be, his interest is where it should be, his desire is where it should be," said Terone Green, executive director of the Virginia-Nebraska Alliance, a consortium of colleges that has been working to collect college funding for Stephens. "The social piece is what makes his case heart-wrenching,"

Since May, Stephens has had no contact with his parents.

He is technically a foster child, though he lives in a small group home for boys instead of a foster home. "Even though I don't have my parents, I have a lot of groups looking out for me," Stephens said.

One of those is the Virginia-Nebraska Alliance. The group traditionally works with college students to increase the ranks of minorities in the health professions, but after stories about Stephens appeared in The Times-Dispatch, the alliance began receiving donations to support his college education. Virginia Commonwealth University is one of the alliance schools.

To make the most of the donations, the alliance coordinated with Partnership for the Future, which matches students with summer jobs and encourages them to put some of their earnings into college savings accounts. Stephens has had a partnership job for the past two summers.

At the end of three summers, the partnership will match up to \$3,000 in a student's account. Stephens' account was thin, in part because he could not work some of last summer because of an illness.

So the alliance put some of the money it had for Stephens into his college savings account. Once the account reached \$3,000, the partnership doubled the money.

This is the first time the two groups have worked together in this manner, but both say the arrangement could benefit other students in the future. Charleita Richardson, director of

programs for the partnership, said that if the alliance can help other partnership students increase their savings, it will be a great opportunity for them to make the most of available matching funds.

The remaining donations still held by the alliance are used to pay Stephens a stipend while he works at the hospital.

"He's the only student who has such great potential that we've picked him up in high school," said state Sen. Benjamin J. Lambert III, the alliance's vice chairman.

Green said the group wants to work with other high school students who, like Stephens, exhibit an early interest in the medical field.

Stephens began assisting with research at the hospital about 10 hours each week last month. A member of the National Honor Society, he says his grade point average is a 4.08. But he won't divulge his SAT score, which he says is good -- but not as good as he'd like.

He has been accepted to Hampton University and Virginia Wesleyan College and is waiting to hear from three other colleges. His first choice is Morehouse College in Atlanta.

One day last week, Stephens and Smith discussed a new medication for sickle cell anemia. Stephens, who enjoys the research but thinks he would like to work with patients, asked Smith about his line of work.

"How do you feel being the guy conducting research, rather than the guy who is on the call?" Stephens asked.

Smith told Stephens about the gratification that comes from making discoveries. Stephens shared with Smith that he went door-to-door with his grandmother as a young child to raise money for sickle cell research.

Smith was tickled to learn of Stephens' early involvement in sickle cell research, the field that has dominated the doctor's career, and looks forward to helping his young friend reach his goals.

"I don't think there's anything in your way, Darryl," the doctor told the teen.

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