

New scholarship keeps Catholic High grads in Memphis

By Peggy Reisser Winburne, Special to The Commercial Appeal
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Zoe Dickey, Amira Randolph and Aiden Willis are entering their freshman year at the University of Memphis next month, thanks in large part to the kindness of a stranger.

The three young women, recent graduates of Memphis Catholic High School, are the first recipients of a new scholarship program started by a local businessman with the intention of keeping bright, ambitious, community service-minded students in Memphis by linking the two schools.

The Education that Works Scholars program offers deserving Catholic High students scholarships to the U of M that cover expenses, such as tuition, fees, room and board — essentially anything not covered by the lottery-funded Tennessee Hope Scholarship and other financial aid received.

The recipients can be of any income level, but must receive and retain the Hope Scholarship, demonstrate strong community service and leadership experience, and have outstanding recommendations from faculty, administrators and other adults. The number of scholarships given each year will vary based on the pool of applicants and the funds available.

The businessman, who wishes to remain anonymous, is a graduate of the U of M and a strong supporter of Catholic education, including the Jubilee Schools and Memphis Catholic High with its Education that Works program. Through that unique work-study program, every student in the high school earns two-thirds of his or her tuition by working five days each month at a local business that partners with the school. Some of the partners include Cargill Inc., Baptist Memorial Health Care, FedEx and AutoZone.

“In his mind, he was like, ‘I can kill two birds with one stone. I can support these kids and help a school I support and help them go to a university I support,’ ” said Dani Ray Barton, director of development and admissions at Memphis Catholic.

According to Memphis Catholic, before 2006, when the Education that Works program began, 78 percent of the seniors graduated and 30 percent received college scholarships. In the past five years, 99 percent of the students have graduated, 100 percent of the graduates have been accepted into college, and 62 percent have received college scholarships.

However, Barton said school administrators noticed that often Memphis Catholic grads would be lured away from the city by bigger scholarships, weren’t aware of all the offerings at the U of M or just wanted to live away from home. Those who stayed in town might not be able to afford to live on campus if room and board is not covered and ended up trying to hold down jobs and meet family obligations while living at home, all of which didn’t give them the best chance for graduating.

The benefactor wanted to find a way to get students to go to the U of M and cover expenses so they could stay on campus and get the full college experience, Barton said.

“Being on campus is a huge plus for our kids, because they are kids who have been involved in things in their school,” she said. “If you go somewhere else, the campus is your life, and if you’re in Memphis, you have other things you can be involved in; sometimes that conflicts with the kids engaging in all the programs on campus.”

That won’t be the case with the scholarship recipients. They are enrolled in the U of M Emerging Leaders Program that accepts about 50 students annually and puts them through four years of training, from courses to workshops to being involved on campus and in community service. It’s all designed help them become leaders in whatever profession they choose. They live together in a residence hall on campus, at least for their freshman year. The leadership program has produced about 300 graduates since it began in 1983.

“I think we want to be partners with the community in developing leaders,” said Justin Lawhead, associate dean for leadership and involvement in the division of student affairs. “This donor decided he wanted to support these students in coming to the University of Memphis and them developing leadership skills. It just made a lot of sense to work them into the program.”

For Zoe Dickey, 18, the oldest of five children, the scholarship is not just an opportunity. “It’s more of a blessing,” she said. She intends to use it to set an example for her siblings. “The scholarship itself means I have a chance to better myself and to give the younger children in my house or in my family a reason to keep going with their education.”

Dickey, valedictorian of the class of 2013, had thought about going to Webster University in St. Louis on scholarship, until she got the ETW scholarship to the U of M. “This scholarship pays for a lot of stuff other colleges probably wouldn’t pay for,” she said. “My mom was like, ‘You’re not going anywhere else. They’re paying for you; this is your college.’”

And that’s just what the donor hoped for when he worked with Dr. Rajiv Grover, dean of the Fogelman College of Business and Economics, to set it up.

“Any and all scholarships help any and all universities,” Grover said. “The universities such as the University of Memphis, it is even more useful, because of the kind of students we get. A lot of them are first-generation students whose parents aren’t that wealthy, so we need those scholarships; our students need those scholarships.”

The scholarships given this year range from \$4,000 to \$11,000, Grover said. The amounts awarded depended on other financial aid packages the recipients received and the amount available to distribute, he said.

Aiden Willis, 18, had planned to attend Spelman College in Atlanta until she received the ETW scholarship. “I always told myself, ‘as soon as I get out of high school, I’m gonna get out of Memphis,’ ” she said. “I grew up here. I was like, ‘I love Memphis, but I’ve got to go.’ ”

She said the scholarship changed her mind because it lets her engage fully in campus life and has a community service requirement that is particularly attractive to her. “I have been blessed to have the parents that I have who were able to provide for me and when I see adults who cannot do that for their children or kids who don’t have the same things that I have, I really do hurt. And so, service has always been a big part of my life, especially when I came to Memphis Catholic. And

the fact that I can give back to all of Memphis and be a part of it is just a wonderful opportunity.”

By the end of their senior year, the three will be required to design their own community service project. Willis, who wants to major in theater and English and just finished an internship as a dresser at Theatre Memphis, wants to help disadvantaged teens get involved in theater.

Amira Randolph, 17, wants to study photography and design a nonprofit organization to help young people get exposure to culture, and in particular art and photography.

“When you have a chance to better improve yourself so that you can improve your community, you have to be aggressive, and you have to take that, and for me this is definitely a wonderful opportunity,” she said.

It is hoped that the ETW scholarship program can grow with donations from others interested in educating the city’s future workforce.

Administrators at Memphis Catholic also hope to attract more businesses as sponsors of their Education that Works work-study program.

“Catholics have historically been great educators, and from a business perspective we have to have a great, educated workforce,” said David Wedaman, president and CEO of ReTrans, an intermodal transportation and logistics company in Memphis, and chairman of the advisory board at Memphis Catholic. “One of the things we need to reach out for is to find more jobs for our students. They earn the money that goes to the Catholic education that works.”

Memphis Catholic High’s Barton thinks the scholarship program is a “testament” to the development of the school, which was founded in 1922. “This is going beyond our walls, because of what we’re doing with the students, and most importantly, the results we’re showing,” she said. “This is now not just a relationship with companies or kids or parents, it’s a university relationship we’re able to develop.”

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