

For Times Scholars, School Was One of Many Hurdles



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

The 2008 New York Times scholars: front row, from left, Santy Barrera, Trinel Torian, Thandar Aung, Joenni Abreu, Qingnan Li; second row, Arian Flores, Yelizaveta Piligromova, Diana Shifrina, Tiana Williams, Ying Wang; third row, Robert Santos, Romaine Hall, Leanne Valentin, Ohn Mar, Gabriella Anderson; back row, Stevens Kelly, Aman Eyasu, Ana Rosado, Mya Marshall, Marlen Amaro.

By [ANDY NEWMAN](#)

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Ten years ago, Denise de las Nueces was a nerdy high school student from a poor Manhattan neighborhood, poring over astronomy books her father had picked out of the trash at the building where he worked as a doorman.



Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

Robert Santos hopes to teach high school math.



Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

Romaine Hall wants to attend Johns Hopkins and be a neurosurgeon.

Eight years ago, Leticia Fox-Thomas was finishing up a childhood spent partly in the city's homeless shelters while cramming for her Regents exams. Five years ago, Mansour Oursanah was a new teenage immigrant from Togo, where he had learned firsthand about poverty and physical abuse but not how to speak or read English.

All three won college scholarships from The New York Times and are now well on their way in their chosen professions — Mr. Oursanah as an industrial designer, Ms. Fox-Thomas in finance and Ms. de las Nueces, who is about to graduate from Harvard Medical School, as a fledgling internist.

This year, Robert Santos is a wispy-bearded high school senior from the Bronx who has just discovered an almost giddy passion for math. Romaine Hall, of Brooklyn, has his own room for the first time and has turned it into a study-carrel-cum-college-prep office.

What Mr. Santos and Mr. Hall will be doing 5 or 10 years from now is largely up to them and the strength of their dreams. But they and 18 other high school seniors from across the city have learned that they will be getting a big push: They were named the 2008 winners of the New York Times Scholarships.

The Times Scholars program, begun in 1999, has now helped 200 promising students. Through its 10-year history, the program, supported largely by the New York Times Company Foundation and annual donations from readers, has kept its mission constant: to recognize New York City high school seniors who have created opportunities for themselves where few existed, and to reward them with money and other less tangible forms of aid.

This year's scholars, chosen from 1,400 applicants, will receive up to \$7,500 a year toward tuition for four years; a laptop computer; summer jobs at The Times; and counseling to help them navigate the often rocky transition from gritty urban high school to college.

Ms. de las Nueces, who will be the first Times Scholar to become a medical doctor, said she hoped they would take as much academic and spiritual nourishment from the program as she had.

“They’re at such a wonderful point in their lives, and they should just go for everything they can, because it’s possible,” she said by phone from the Dominican Republic, where she is working in an AIDS clinic for part of the semester. “I would never have dreamed 10 years ago when I won the scholarship that I’d be where I am today.”

The scholarship program began modestly in 1999, with only six students chosen. But after The Times published an article about the first class, donations poured in, allowing the foundation to offer scholarships to 14 more finalists.

Over the years, the scholars have included immigrants from more than 15 countries and natives of some of the city’s roughest neighborhood, star students at small Roman Catholic schools, low-performing and ill-equipped public schools and magnet schools like Stuyvesant. The scholars were raised by single parents, grandparents or no parents at all. Many had siblings and guardians who fell prey to drugs or crime.

From humble beginnings, they have mostly flourished. Members of the inaugural class of 1999, now in their mid- to late 20s, include a Navy scientist, a lawyer who specializes in political asylum cases, bankers and an analyst in the money laundering unit of the Manhattan district attorney’s office. Their ranks also include an author: Anahad O’Connor, a Times reporter whose 2007 book, “Never Shower in a Thunderstorm,” based on his “Really?” column in the newspaper’s science section, has sold 35,000 copies.

As the Times Scholars make their way through college, the program continues to work with them, providing academic and emotional support and helping them secure summer jobs that often open the doors to careers.

“What we really do, beyond giving a check, is what makes this program different from any other college scholarship program I know about,” said Soma Golden Behr, the director of the scholarship program and a former assistant managing editor at The Times.

“The Times, as a kind of a large family, helps us select these kids, and then becomes their bosses in the first summer, their mentors, their advisers,” she continued. “We applaud when they succeed, and when they stumble, we try to pick them up.”

Along the way, the program has attracted donors like Ernest Abrahamson, an entrepreneur in Rhode Island who has given more than \$1 million and has taken several of the scholars who attended [Brown University](#) under his wing. “It’s been joyful for me,” Mr. Abrahamson said.

Daniel Golab, a 1999 Times Scholar and now an investment banker, has donated \$4,000 in recent years. “I just wanted to give back,” he said.

This year’s scholars, who are from Burma and the Bronx, Mexico and Manhattan, Ethiopia and China and Crown Heights, came to their passion for education through different routes.

Since immigrating from Jamaica at age 2, Romaine Hall has bounced around. He has lived with at least 15 relatives at the same time in a two-bedroom apartment in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. He has lived with his mother, who is a home health care aide, and two siblings in one room. It was not until last summer that Mr. Hall acquired a room of his own, in the basement apartment of an aunt’s house in Canarsie.

Mr. Hall, a driven young man, is taking four Advanced Placement courses at Life Sciences Secondary School on the Upper East Side while serving as student government secretary and debate and track team captain. He has covered the walls of his haven with Post-its and filled it with schoolwork folders.

“It looks like a cubicle,” he said. “I never had that kind of space where I could optimize it to my fullest potential.”

Mr. Hall has been drawn to medicine. Last year, a brain cancer was diagnosed in a relative. She asked him to accompany her to her chemotherapy treatments. Mr. Hall was apprehensive, but he went along. To his surprise, he said, “it kind of intensified my passion to become a neurosurgeon.”

Mr. Hall hopes to attend [Johns Hopkins University](#), where the faculty includes Benjamin S. Carson, the neurosurgeon who performed the first successful separation of twins conjoined at the back of the head.

“Getting tutelage from Ben Carson himself would be the experience of a lifetime,” Mr. Hall said.

Robert Santos was at best a mediocre math student at Herbert H. Lehman High School in the Bronx. One day last year in precalculus class, though, he had something akin to a spiritual conversion.

“I felt something happening to me and my hand went up,” he said. The answers came to him, one after another. His teacher, Anthony Lifrieri, told him, “Robert, you’re on fire today, kid,” Mr. Santos said.

Mr. Santos was hooked. Now he routinely stays at school past 8 p.m., tutoring younger students or helping his teacher grade papers. He plans to attend [New York University](#) and to teach high school math.