

Students from Norwalk Housing Authority receive scholarships to pursue passions

By R.A. Schuetz



Photo: Erik Trautmann / Hearst Connecticut Media

Recipient Nadine Delcin receives a congratulatory hug from Norwalk Housing Authority Scholarship Committee member k.C. Senie as The NHA holds its 20th Annual Scholarship Awards Ceremony Wednesday, June 20, ... more

NORWALK — Jessica Davis has known she wanted to work in criminal justice ever since she was a kid growing up in Washington Village. In fact, she traces the roots of her passion to her experiences there, as she witnessed friends getting in trouble with the law.

“I wanted to be the person to help because, personally, I know they’re not bad

people,” Davis said.

Now, she’s proud to say she is entering the last semester of her master’s degree in criminal justice at Sacred Heart University with a 4.0 GPA. Long-term, she hopes to work in the fields of probation and parole, but as she works on her graduate degree, she’s already helping people by teaching parenting classes at St. Joseph Parenting Center in Stamford.

“I work with domestic violence victims and people who had unfortunate circumstances that led them to a shelter,” she said.

Davis was standing outside the auditorium at Stepping Stones Museum for Children Wednesday evening because after opening her eyes to the need for dedicated criminal justice workers, her childhood in the city’s public housing had made her eligible for a scholarship from the Norwalk Housing Authority. She was one of 36 recipients of the Norwalk Housing Foundation Scholarship, a scholarship dedicated to Norwalk Housing Authority residents ranging from \$1,000 to \$15,000 a person, being recognized at the museum that day.

“Thank God,” Davis said, “because it’s been expensive, and it’s been a big help.”

This year is the scholarship’s 20th anniversary. According to Craig Adler, director of development at the Norwalk Housing Foundation, the scholarship started informally — “The first two years were just like pass around the hat,” he said — before formally becoming a nonprofit. Since those early days, the scholarship has grown. After Wednesday’s ceremony, more than \$1.9 million had been awarded to 257 students over two decades.

The scholarship has been recognized and awarded by many institutions, including Harvard University, which named it one of the top 25 innovations in American government in 2015, and the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials, which gave it the National Award of Excellence.

The Norwalk Housing Foundation boasts that every single dollar it receives goes directly to scholarship recipients.

This year, those recipients included both undergraduates and graduate students pursuing degrees ranging from the arts to the sciences.

Clyfford Simeon, who will be starting as a freshman at Southern Connecticut State University, said the scholarship has allowed him to pursue a degree in theater arts, following his love for film and the stage.

“I just think it’s really great that they give it to so many people — even people like me in theater arts, which many people don’t consider a career — to see what we can do and provide help,” he said.

Other students going into freshman year included Benoise Celestin, who has not yet declared a major but is considering sociology at Southern Connecticut State University. Students have the chance to reapply for the scholarship for every year of their education, an opportunity that a number of undergraduates, including nursing student Kerline Aristhene and business administration student Syndie Lauture, have taken advantage of.

Some of the students being celebrated that day were going back to school after several years to in order to further their careers.

“I just decided to go to school full time — I’m 36 now —to go on a professional level with cooking,” said Amador Umpierre, a culinary arts student at Norwalk Community College. While he’s no stranger to the kitchen, having worked in the food industry for years before deciding to study it, he said he’s been impressed with how much he has already been able to learn, from how to finance a new restaurant to French terms for various techniques. His vision is to open a fusion Caribbean-Southern restaurant honoring his Puerto Rican roots.

A common theme among students was the idea of giving back. Desiree

Waters, who is about to start on her master's degree in social work, described it as a calling.

“I want to do something that I love for the rest of my life, and there are so many people who need help,” she said. “I just give back and really wanted to serve — it's my passion and desire to do that.”

Emmanuella Jean-Louis, who is majoring in law and public affairs at Lasell College with a minor in political science, echoed Waters's sentiment.

“I've always wanted to speak for those who can't speak for themselves,” she said. “I just want to make a difference.”

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