

[Return to your last page](#)

Archive for Sunday, October 04, 2009

## Former foster child in Chicago now a million-dollar scholar

Scholarships flooded in for an A student with a lost childhood



By Stephanie Banchemo

October 04, 2009

ATLANTA - – Derrius Quarles leans back in his seat and methodically debates Aristotle's theory of truth during freshman honors English class at Morehouse College.

He strides across campus in a navy blue tailored suit and a bold red sweater handing out business cards that boast

“Student/Entrepreneur/Leader.”

But behind the 19-year-old’s dauntless appearance is a past that few on campus know.

When Quarles was 5, the state took him away from his mother. He spent his childhood bouncing from home to home before ending up on his own at 17 in an apartment on Chicago’s South Side.

His arrival at a prestigious, historically African-American college – with more than \$1 million in scholarship offers – is a story of inspiration and anguish. And it’s a testament to his determination to prove that he is better than his beginnings.

“You can’t go around thinking you are inferior just because you didn’t have parents,” he says. “For me, it’s about knowing where you are from and accepting it, but more important, knowing where you are going.”

Despite his polished veneer, sometimes there are glimpses into a more complicated young man.

In sociology class, when students discuss their childhood dependence on parents, the usually verbose Quarles withdraws from the lively discussion and doodles in a notebook. When a tutoring coordinator asks students about the “caring adults” in their lives, Quarles mumbles something about an aunt.

He rarely talks about his childhood, but when pushed, the words tumble out.

“I’ve had people tell me that I ain’t never gonna be s—. That’s not a scratch, that cuts deep,” he says. “After so many people put me down, I said, ‘I’m gonna show you.’ ”

Quarles made good on that promise when he won more than \$1 million in scholarship offers, including a full ride at Morehouse. A graduate of Kenwood Academy High School in Chicago, he is one of about a dozen students nationwide to garner such a bounty, according to Mark Kantrowitz, who runs the Web site Finaid, which tracks college aid.

He won full scholarships to five universities, the Gates Millennium Scholarship worth \$160,000 and the Horatio Alger and Coca-Cola scholarships, each worth \$20,000, to name a few. He’ll use most of it to pay for advanced schooling.

Now, Quarles hopes to weave a new family narrative at an all-male college known as much for molding brotherhood as for molding scholars.

He is searching for a band of brothers who will not abandon him, as so many others have in the past.

**Left alone**When Quarles was 4, his father was stabbed to death with a pocketknife in a fight on a vacant lot. His mother struggled with drugs.

Quarles doesn't remember much about those years, outside of being left alone with his brother for long stretches of time, pilfering bread and snacks from a convenience store.

"We had to fend for ourselves the best we knew how," he says. "My brother really stepped up as an older brother. He never left my side."

This connection to his brother was a sustaining one. But it would not last.

When Quarles was 5, officials placed him and his brother in a temporary foster home, then with an aunt.

Quarles remembers this as a period of calm. He learned to read sitting in his aunt's lap, paging through her favorite Bible passages. He recalls eating around the dinner table with more food than he ever imagined.

But when Quarles was 13, his older brother was removed from the home and placed in a foster home in Maywood. Quarles wanted to go with his brother and his aunt let him. State records simply show she was not interested in becoming his legal guardian. Quarles says he is not certain why his aunt let him leave and he would not provide her name.

"I'm content not to know," he says. "I'm sure it was a good reason."

Quarles' brother left the foster home a few months later, one of the toughest losses of Quarles' life. "That's when I learned you can't trust people to stay around," he says. "That when I learned to lean on me."

Three years later, Quarles was placed with his grandmother and an aunt in Chicago. But within a year, he convinced officials with

the Department of Children and Family Services that he would be better off on his own.

The high school junior packed his clothes, books and a set of golf clubs and moved to an apartment as part of a state transitional living program for foster children. There, he learned to budget his money, wash and dry his clothes, shop for groceries and cook. He received a small stipend and got a part-time job at a barbershop.

At 17, he was living like an adult.

Desmond Kemp, who became a mentor to Quarles – a brother, really – when they met at a tutoring program, initially opposed the move.

But Kemp was impressed with how Quarles kept up the apartment and budgeted his money with such precision that he always had enough for fashionable clothes and textbooks.

He was awed when he took Quarles to the grocery store and the teenager shunned the snack aisles and headed to the fresh fruits and vegetables.

“He kept saying, ‘This is brain food. This is what I need to eat to build a strong brain,’ ” Kemp recalls. “I had to laugh but also stared in amazement at how mature he was for a teenager.”

Even though his home life was sometimes chaotic, Quarles brought home A’s and B’s in elementary school. That changed when he entered Kenwood Academy. First quarter of freshman year, he got an F and eked out only a 2.5 grade point average.

Providence intervened in the form of a pushy biology teacher.

Quarles had enrolled in a summer biology course but skipped the first day and was late for the second. Teacher Nivedita Nutakki pulled him into the hallway and told him he was wasting his talent.

“He needed a push and some encouragement,” she says. “I spotted right away that this was a special kid who had a special mind.”

Quarles got an A in the class. Sophomore year, he earned a 3.6 grade point average. By junior year, he was carrying three advanced placement classes and earning straight A's.

"Initially, I was doing it to show my biology teacher that I could do it," he says. "But then it kind of moved into, 'I didn't have to show her anymore.' I was doing it to show myself."

Quarles latched on to Nutakki and spent hours after school with her, engrossed in a subject that inspired him to want to be a doctor.

He found other mentors who, together, played the role of parent.

Lynda Parker, a Kenwood counselor, recounts how aggressively Quarles pursued college scholarships. He would stay late to use the school computer for research and pester Parker to complete his recommendation letters.

"With teenagers, the biggest motivator is the parent," Parker says. "Every step of the way, you have to contact the parents so they can push the kids. Not only did Derrius not have a parent to push him, he was pushing himself as hard, or harder, than parents of the other kids."

Even his oversize ambition couldn't get Quarles past one roadblock. He dreamed of attending Harvard, until one college adviser told him his 28 ACT score was simply not high enough. He abandoned his plans.

**At a crossroads** Now, as he walks the red clay hills of the Morehouse campus, the training ground of Martin Luther King Jr., Quarles seems poised between who he was and who he wants to be.

His dorm room looks like every other teenager's. The bed is mussed, the refrigerator and shelves are stacked with Doritos and Coke, and the focus of the room is the 32-inch flat-screen TV and Xbox he bought with his roommate.

But inside Quarles' closet hang four suits and a half-dozen wrinkle-free dress shirts. In the corner sits an iron and ironing board.

As a high school senior, Quarles Googled tips on business attire. Now, his belt color always matches his shoes, and his shirt sleeves are tailored to fall exactly halfway across his watch.

“How you dress says something to the world about who you think you are,” he explains.

Quarles’ counselors, friends and teachers worry he is too eager to grow up.

“I keep telling him that everyone has a right to live as a child during their childhood years,” Parker says.

Still, Quarles keeps an ambitious list of goals: graduate from medical school, earn a doctorate, start a tutoring program for low-income Chicago students, help shape the city’s public health policy, become the U.S. surgeon general.

“I have no time to play around,” he says. “There are people back home in Chicago starving, homeless, unemployed, killing each other. There is a difference between enjoying life and wasting time, and I can’t waste any time.

“I want to make a difference. I want to show people that I can be all those things people said I could never be.”

Quarles now has the means to pay for his education. And oversize optimism could get him the rest of the way.

During a training session for a Morehouse tutoring program one day, students introduce themselves and list three songs on their iPod – typically Kanye West, Beyonce, Jay-Z and Lou Rawls.

When his turn comes, Quarles stands.

“Have you ever seen the movie ‘Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory’?” he asks, prompting raised eyebrows. “There’s a song in there called ‘Pure Imagination.’ That’s what I’m listening to these days.”

Quarles later explains that the lyrics inspire him: *“Anything you want to, do it. Want to change the world? There’s nothing to it.”*

“It’s so powerful,” he says. “It shows the power of imagination. If you imagine it, you can do it.”

[sbanchero@tribune.com](mailto:sbanchero@tribune.com):<mailto:sbanchero@tribune.com>

---

## Related Keywords

Horatio Alger  
Dining and Drinking  
High Schools  
Lou Rawls  
Social Issues  
Clubs and  
Associations  
Teen-agers  
Awards and Prizes  
Science and  
Technology  
Colleges and  
Universities  
Teaching and  
Learning  
Xbox 360  
Kenwood  
Schools  
Students  
Clothing and Textiles  
Industry  
Education  
Wine, Beer, and  
Spirits  
Natural Science  
Family  
Reverend

## Related articles

Swimming in scholarship offers Sep 18, 2009  
Million-dollar scholar  
On this day in history Jan 13, 2010  
Getting poisonous with Bret Michaels Jul 17, 2009  
Activist business leader dies Jul 03, 2009  
Valentine's Day events Feb 05, 2009  
On this day in history Jan 13, 2009

**Read More from Stephanie Banchemo**

---

---

Copyright 2010 Chicago Tribune