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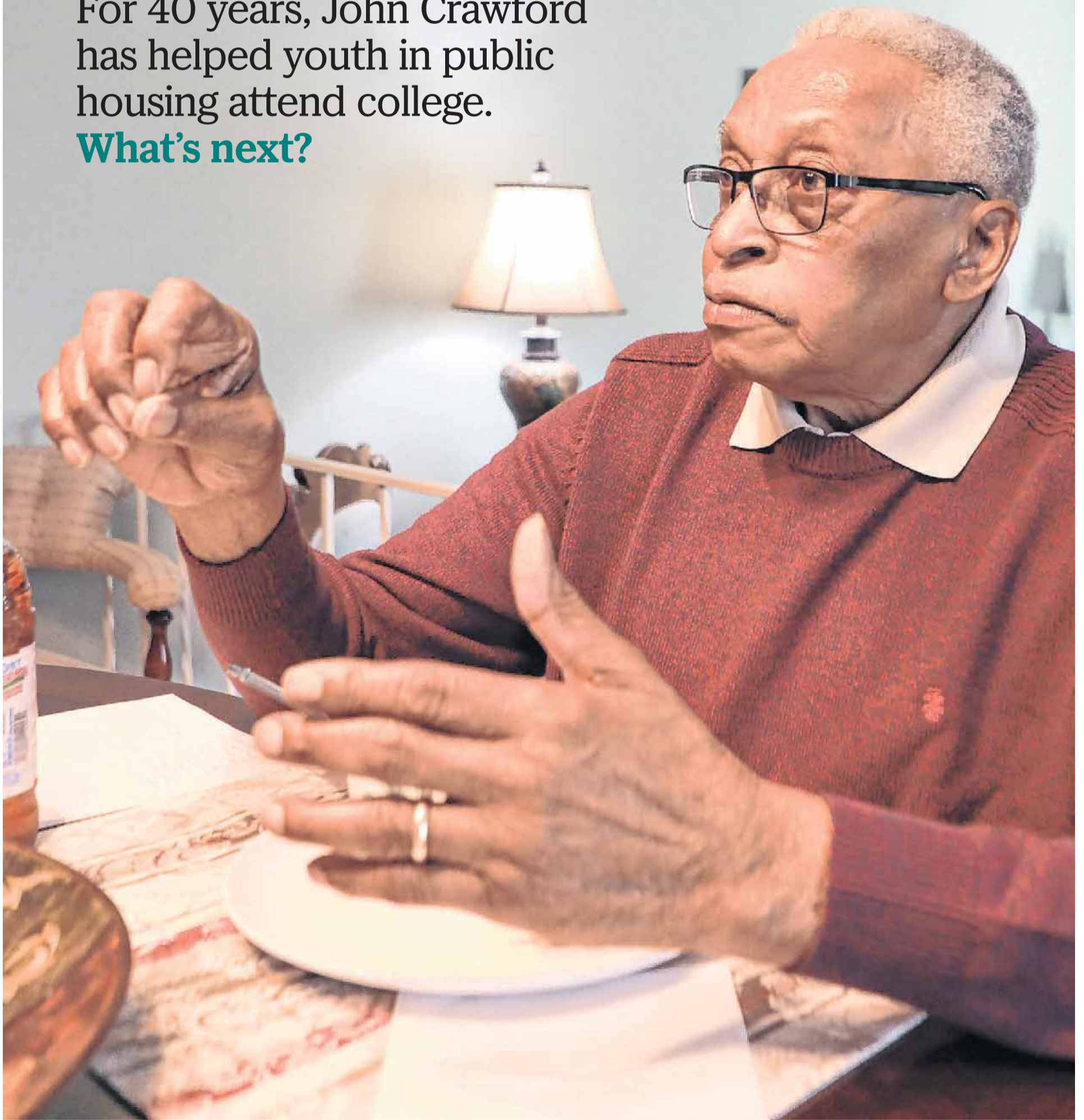
The Charlotte Observer

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1,000 SCHOLARSHIPS AND COUNTING

For 40 years, John Crawford has helped youth in public housing attend college.

What's next?



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STUDENT AWARDS



DIAMOND VENCES dvences@charlotteobserver.com

John Crawford and Christopher Davis meet in west Charlotte. Christopher lived in multiple public housing developments and became one of 1,000 students Crawford helped over the past 40 years.

What's next for this one-of-a kind Charlotte scholarship?

BY LISA VERNON SPARKS
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Sometime in the early 1970s, John Crawford received an offer he couldn't refuse.

The Charlotte Housing Authority approached him about a job working with families and children who lived in its dozens of complexes. Crawford, then a school teacher and coach, loved working with children. It was a natural fit and he accepted the offer.

But early in the gig, Crawford saw things he found troubling — prostitution, drug dealing and teens overdosing at some of the properties, making it an unsafe environment, he said.

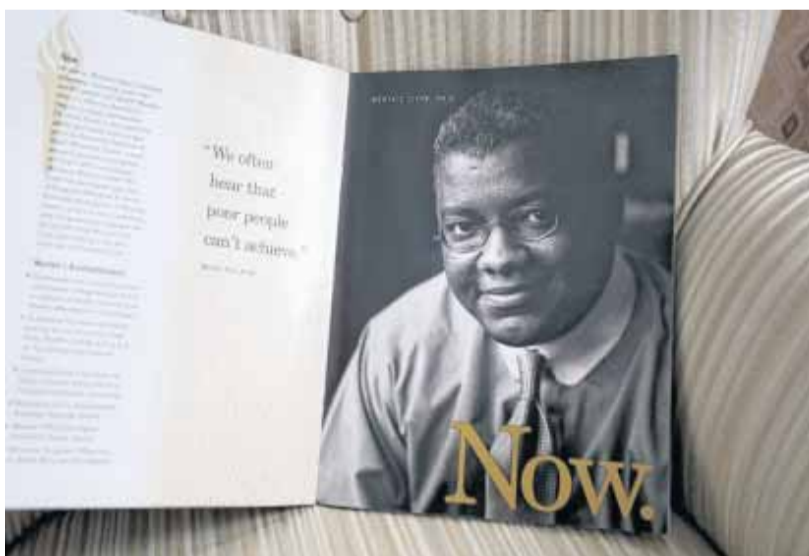
"I wanted to change that," he said.

His method didn't surface until 1982 when a college-age resident reached out to him, the youth services director, asking for money to help finish school.

That's when Crawford realized the need and saw a way to give youth living in public housing more control over their destinies.

It evolved into the Greater Steps Scholars, a scholarship fund which after 40 years has reached a notable milestone — 1,000 students living in public housing who have been awarded scholarships.

Many came from impoverished backgrounds whose families may not otherwise have been able to



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John Crawford remembers back in 1982 a young man asked him for \$300 so that he could finish his senior year in college. From that moment on, Crawford's mission was to find money to help poor kids in public housing who would otherwise not be able to shoulder the hefty cost of attending college. Monteic Sizer, Ph.D. is among the program's successful students.

shoulder the hefty cost of higher education. For some already making a plan for college, this scholarship was a welcomed boost.

It's the only program of its kind in Charlotte, says Aisha Strothers, the executive director of the \$5 million endowment now managed by The Foundation for the Carolinas. The goal is to ultimately get to \$10 million.

"The big thing here is the pro-

gramming that we provide, that assists these children," said Cecil Burrowes, The Greater Steps Scholars board chairman. "We can give you scholarships, that's great. That gets you into the school. What happens while you're in the school?"

The program began as the Charlotte Housing Authority Scholarship Fund, which was among many at the housing authority — re-

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THE BIG THING HERE IS THE PROGRAMMING THAT WE PROVIDE, THAT ASSISTS THESE CHILDREN. WE CAN GIVE YOU SCHOLARSHIPS, THAT'S GREAT. THAT GETS YOU INTO THE SCHOOL. WHAT HAPPENS WHILE YOU'RE IN THE SCHOOL?

Cecil Burrowes, The Greater Steps Scholars board chairman.

named Inlivan in 2019 — to support economic mobility for the hundreds of families living in public housing, CEO and president Fulton Meachem told the Charlotte Observer.

The housing authority has financially partnered with Crawford and the scholar fund since it began.

"The reason that John reached out to our residents, is because we all know that their zip code, you know, doesn't define the destination," Meachem said.

SEE SCHOLARSHIPS, 6A



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John Crawford reflects on 40 years of working with young people while at his home in Charlotte on April 5. Gayle B. Crawford, his wife, is seen in the back. The scholarship fund that Crawford started is seeking to reach \$10 million in funding. It currently sits at around \$5 million.

FROM PAGE 4A

SCHOLARSHIPS

Recipients from the first group in 1983 who grew up in subsidized housing are now working in professional fields. After completing undergraduate studies there are some who have earned advanced degrees, as well.

Over the past four decades, scholars have graduated from more than 70 colleges. Among them: the University of North Carolina system, Johnson C. Smith University, Queens University of Charlotte, Winthrop University, Howard University, Spelman College, Wake Forest University, Central Piedmont Community College and Duke University.

Degrees earned range from engineering, computer science, medicine and psychology to accounting, business management and social work.

The scholars program expects to announce the newest class mid-summer, said Strothers, who has been managing it since 2015.

"I always felt like this was the right thing to do," said Crawford, who is now 86. "I've kept my foot on the pedal. I guess I'll be doing this until I pass out."

This year's milestone comes with a few honors for Crawford, who hails from South Carolina and is an alumnus of Johnson C. Smith University, UNC Charlotte and MIT.

This year, Crawford received one of Mecklenburg County's highest honors, the Order of the Hornet, bestowed by the Board of Commissioners. Additionally, Gov. Roy Cooper's office awarded him the Order of the Long Leaf Pine, the state's highest civilian honor, recognizing his 40-plus years of service to youth in Mecklenburg County.

'I NEED \$300'

When Crawford started working at the housing authority four decades ago there were roughly 5,000 families living in dozens of public housing sites across the Queen City, he told The Charlotte Observer. "The average income was about \$6,000 a year," Crawford said. Because Crawford grew up with strong Christian values, he wanted to help the youth living in these properties, some that had

several hundred units and families challenged to make ends meet, let alone pay for college.

"I was wrestling with the Lord, 'what is it that you want me to do?' because I was still a devout Christian," he said "I wrestled with that for about two years."

One day, a young man living in Dalton Village (now called Arbor Glen) called Crawford seeking help.

"Mr. Crawford, I need \$300 to go back to Winston-Salem State for my senior year," Crawford recalled him saying. "He worked and saved money over the summer, but came up \$300 short. I told him, 'We'll find the money' and we did. I'd ask anybody for money for my kids."

That was October 1982.

"And the next school year, we had raised enough money to be able to send kids to college," he said.

'HEY WE CAN DO THIS'

But raising money didn't happen overnight. It took cultivating.

The drive started with conversations with Crawford's boss, housing authority leadership and the Mecklenburg County Board of Commissioners about starting a scholarship for kids living in public housing.

While Crawford wrote a full-scale proposal in 1986, he initially asked people to chip in. A first donation came from a fan of his idea, who gave \$5. More money poured in, and with help from Arthur Griffin, now a Mecklenburg County commissioner, Crawford organized a fundraiser breakfast.

"I asked him to speak at our first breakfast," Crawford said. "This is when I sent letters out to about 150 people asking them to come to a breakfast at 7:30 in the morning — and about 100 showed up."

Crawford said he asked Griffin during the breakfast to help him raise \$50,000 to start the scholarship. During the breakfast, the duo raised \$3,500 in donations.

"That morning, I realized, 'Hey, we can do this.' And by the end of that year, we raised \$64,000. The second year we raised \$89,000," Crawford said.

OVER THE PAST FOUR DECADES, SCHOLARS HAVE GRADUATED FROM MORE THAN 70 COLLEGES. AMONG THEM: THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA SYSTEM, JOHNSON C. SMITH UNIVERSITY, QUEENS UNIVERSITY OF CHARLOTTE, WINTHROP UNIVERSITY, HOWARD UNIVERSITY, SPELMAN COLLEGE, WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY, CENTRAL PIEDMONT COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND DUKE UNIVERSITY.

Word of the emerging scholarship spread. The donor breakfast became an annual event that drew a who's who of power and influence across Charlotte.

That included former Bank of America CEO Hugh McColl; former Charlotte Mayor Harvey Gantt; other financial sector leaders, such as Dale T. Halton, as well as former Charlotte Observer publisher Rolfe Neill.

"Rolfe became my friend," Crawford said. "Every year we had a breakfast fundraiser. And Rolfe was our speaker the second year. And he also gave the fund \$25,000."

The Foundation for the Carolinas stepped into the arena in 1986, Strothers said. A donor read early coverage about the scholarship and suggested Crawford contact the foundation to establish an endowment to raise money, rather than an event here and there.

"(Donors) feel confident with being able to invest in the foundation," Strothers said.

LASTING LEGACY

Fund managers say they already have a road map to sustain this distinctive Charlotte scholarship to make this legacy last long after Crawford and early organizers have stepped down.

Some 60 students, from 17 to 24

years old, benefit from the fund each year. They receive scholarships ranging from \$2,000 to \$6,000, depending on GPA and up to five years in college.

The numbers include an average of 25 new students and those still receiving scholarships every year they are in college. The application process opens in October, and organizers host recruiting and planning events throughout the Inlivan housing system. The scholarship has since been expanded for youth whose families receive housing choice vouchers or other subsidized housing.

"I'm looking to grow that number," said Burrowes, the chairman for the past two years. He noted he wants to bring that number to 100, but not just recruiting students, also helping them succeed while in college with a mentorship program.

Some 92% of scholars are first-generation to attend college, Strothers adds. Having a mentor help them navigate getting into and staying in college makes a huge difference in the success rate. It's programming that has gotten more robust since the early days.

"We paired each of our students with a one-on-one mentor that is ideally in their career field," she said, adding it's to give them encouragement, share advice, wisdom about opportunities.

Burrowes hopes to extend this opportunity not only to youth currently living at Inlivan-managed properties, but for youth whose families are on waiting lists for housing, provided the students don't age out. Over the next 40 years, Burrowes hopes to increase industry representation on the board beyond the financial sector, and also connect more with other underrepresented populations.

"I want to amplify the brand ... on the lips, tongues of everyone who's in the Charlotte area," he said. "... we need to open up our engagement from a diverse ethnicity perspective ... so those families are well aware of who we are, what we do and how we can support them."

More on the fund and scholarship program is available here.

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"I always felt like this was the right thing to do," said John Crawford, who is now 86. "I've kept my foot on the pedal. I guess I'll be doing this until I pass out."

'I'm gonna get there.

How a unique scholarship helped 4 Charlotteans get their degrees

BY REBECCA NOEL AND LISA VERNON SPARKS
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Asports agent. A Christian life coach. A mechanical engineer. These are some of the career paths followed by alumni of The Greater Steps Scholars program. It exclu-

sively provides college funding for teens and young adults in communities managed by the city's housing authority, now called Inlivan. After four decades, it has hit a noteworthy milestone — 1,000 students who have been awarded scholarships for college.

The program is the brainchild of John T. Crawford, who raised money for chil-

dren living in public housing to help them afford college. The idea began with single request and blossomed into a \$5 million endowment, now managed by the Foundation for the Carolinas.

The Charlotte Observer caught up with some of the earliest recipients and talked to them about their lives in public housing and how the program helped.



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In 1983 Albert Blake was in the first group of students who received a college scholarship called the Greater Step Scholars, a unique fund for children who grew up in public housing. Blake enrolled at North Carolina A&T University in 1983 and earned a bachelor's in mechanical engineering, which led to jobs working as a civilian engineer for the U.S. Department of the Army and at the Pentagon. Blake also earned two master's degrees in engineering.

ALBERT BLAKE

Received scholarship in 1983 — 'I'm gonna get there'

Playing jacks, marbles, salvaging old bicycles and then riding them — those were the activities that saturated Albert Blake's childhood during the late 1970s.

The now 60-year-old Chapel Hill resident remembers days playing near warehouses and factories, now the site of Camp North End.

Blake lived in a public housing community called Fairview Homes near Oaklawn Avenue, off Beatties Ford Road in Charlotte, with his single mother and younger brother.

"We had a lot of what we'd call neighborhood moms that would frequent the neighborhood and kind of keep a pulse on who the bad kids were in that neighborhood," he said.

Blake said neighborhood moms often directed police to certain blocks because of unsavory activity. But the same moms looked out for him. His own mother was loving and made sure there was food on the table and they had clean clothes, he said. But she ran a tight household with strict rules.

"We had to be home before the streetlights came on," Blake said. "She was like, 'hey if you're not home by then, you sleep out in the street.'"

Blake's neighborhood school was West Charlotte High School, but after Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools completed redistricting in the late 1970s, Blake was bussed to attend Independence High School near Mint Hill, he said.

Attending a predominantly white



Albert Blake shows off his N.C. A&T State University socks while being photographed on May 8 at his home in Chapel Hill.

ETHAN HYMAN ehyman@newsobserver.com

school expanded his world view, he said. Meanwhile, near his apartment, a bustling new development with fancy homes and manicured lawns emerged. Blake knew that was the life he wanted for himself — to live in a nice house, with a professional job and away from the growing ugliness he saw in his community.

"I didn't have any money. My mom didn't have any money. I was pretty good (at) math. I didn't know how I was gonna get to college," he said. "But, I'm gonna get there. And so, anything that looked like there was going to be a way out, I was volunteering and asking questions."

Blake's plan originally was to at-

tend community college, take pre-requisites, work a job, save up money and then transfer to UNC Charlotte. Then he learned about a new scholarship program for youth living in public housing.

Housing authority leadership shared the info in the community rooms and hubs within each public housing complex. There, Blake met several people wanting to help youth in public housing, who put him in touch with John Crawford.

With a scholarship from the Charlotte Housing Authority, other school financial aid and \$20 in spot cash from his older brother, Blake enrolled at North Carolina A&T

University in 1983. He earned a bachelor's in mechanical engineering, which led to jobs working as a civilian engineer for the U.S. Department of the Army and at the Pentagon. Blake also earned two master's degrees in engineering.

"Sometimes people see things in you that you don't see in yourself," Blake said. "I didn't want to be up in the projects anymore. There are some things I want to do, places I want to go, people I want to meet, and I just stepped out there."

SEE LADREON HARE, 8A



JEFF SINER jsiner@charlotteobserver.com

Ladreon Aneka Hare is among the students awarded a scholarship through the Greater Step Scholars, which helps youth in Charlotte who lack adequate financial means.

LADREON HARE

Received scholarship in 1990 — 'It was a second family'

The summer after second grade, Ladreon Hare tried to prove numbers weren't infinite.

"My math teacher had told me numbers were infinite, and I didn't believe her," Hare said. "I asked my mom like, 'What do you mean you can just keep adding zeros?'"

Following the summer, she'd return to school for third grade and admit to her teacher she was, in fact, right. This was just one of many projects Hare gave herself over summers as a child, eagerly waiting for school to start again.

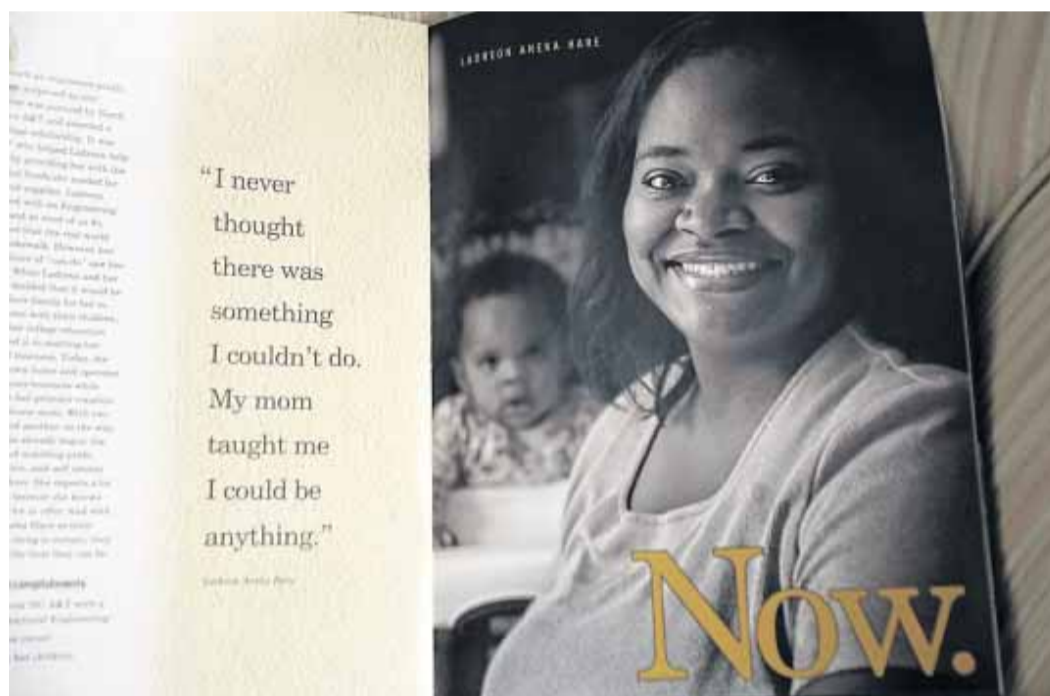
"I always loved school," Hare said.

She only missed three days of school from the beginning of elementary school through high school graduation. So, for the curious and ambitious Myers Park High School grad, college was always a foregone conclusion.

"I felt like there was enough money out there for me, and I was always very focused on my grades," she said.

She and her family were skeptical of scholarships that purported to "save" low-income kids. After all, self-motivation and academic prowess were never a problem for Hare.

"Sometimes the narrative for the people who want to help people is more about them than the people they're trying to help," Hare said. "They want to say, 'These students wouldn't have been anything or gone anywhere without our help,' and we didn't like that narrative."



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Ladreon Aneka Hare enrolled at North Carolina A&T State University in 1990, where she studied architectural engineering.

So, John Crawford personally visited Hare at Charlotte's Southside Homes complex, where she lived with her grandmother and two aunts, to convince her to apply for the Greater Steps Scholarship.

"He explained the mentorship piece of it and what it was really about in addition to the money, which is what really convinced me to apply," Hare said.

Each student in the program receives a mentor in their field who can help them navigate their time in college and beyond. Hare enrolled at North Carolina A&T State University in 1990, where she studied architec-

tural engineering. Her mentor was Carole Hoefener, a Charlotte architect and former board chair of the Charlotte Housing Authority, now called Inlivan.

"Having someone through the mentorship portion of it was a huge plus," Hare said. "I had someone to bounce ideas off of and help me plan what my next steps would be."

Hare went on to become a mechanical design engineer and currently works for a Charlotte firm that provides engineering services to power plants. She's also still involved in the scholarship program and previously served as its board

chair.

Since her days as a recipient, the program has increased its programming, including study skills, financial planning classes and mentorship opportunities to help students with more than just financing their degrees, she said. Hare also continues to meet with the peers she met during the program, most of whom are still in the Charlotte area. For Hare, the relationships are what truly propelled her forward.

"It was a second family," Hare said.



MELISSA MELVIN-RODRIGUEZ mrodriguez@charlotteobserver.com

Crystal Pratt enrolled at Winston-Salem State University in 2001. With the Greater Steps scholarship and others, she didn't pay a dime for college, graduating with honors and a degree in mass communications in 2005.

CRYSTAL PRATT

Received scholarship in 2001 — 'It's a celebration of education'

Crystal Pratt has made a career of helping others imagine what's possible.

She worked as a career counselor at UNC Charlotte and Central Piedmont Community College before pivoting this year to become a Christian life coach.

"I worked helping students, just like someone helped me, in figuring out what their career path was," Pratt said. "Now, instead of focusing on helping people figure out their career, I focus on helping people through their issues in life."

The career shift wasn't the first time Pratt changed course. As a kid, she didn't even want to go to college.

"I loved music and would tinker around with a keyboard I got from the thrift store, so I really wanted to be a music producer," Pratt said.

She was a curious and intelligent kid, and grades weren't a problem. Pratt was an honors student at Myers Park High School who enjoyed English and debate class. So when Crystal Pratt told her mother she didn't want to go to college, she was dismayed.

"My mother worked at Central Piedmont Community College — and still does — so she thought 'Oh my goodness, my own child doesn't want to go to college,'" Pratt said.

A neighbor of theirs in their close-knit community of Alive Oaks — a neighborhood that sat across from SouthPark Mall at the time — was enrolled in college. Pratt's mother invited him to come speak with her about college life.

"It seemed pretty cool, and I thought, 'I can go to school for whatever I'm interested in,'"

Pratt said.

Then, one of the program coordinators for The Greater Steps Scholars knocked on Pratt's door and encouraged her to apply for the funding.

"All of that really changed my attitude about college," Pratt said.

She enrolled at Winston-Salem State University in 2001. With the Greater Steps scholarship and others, she didn't pay a dime for college, graduating with honors and a degree in mass communications in 2005. Shortly after, she bought her first home.

"I was able to buy a house when I was 22, right out of college, because I didn't have any debt," Pratt said.

She says the scholarship has been "lifesaving," not only because of the access it gave her to education, but also because of the community she's found in the other alumni. She continues to get together with current and former Greater Steps scholars and was formerly chair of the scholarship's alumni association.

"We really are a family," Pratt said. "I told them, 'We're going to be in wheelchairs when we're old, rolling each other around, putting teeth in each others' mouths.'"

They still have a yearly celebration of all the program's past and current scholars. Pratt says what started as a cookout in John Crawford's backyard has evolved into a full-fledged production complete with catering and DJ's. Still, Pratt says, the core is the same.

"It's a celebration of education, a celebration of mentorship, a celebration of just being successful in life," Pratt said. "The legacy of the whole organization is just incredible."



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Christopher Davis received a scholarship in 2004 from the Charlotte Housing Authority, which later became the Greater Steps Scholars program.

CHRIS DAVIS

Received scholarship in 2004 — ‘I just knew I needed to stay busy’

After moving around from different homes during his younger years, Chris Davis and his family moved to First Ward in the early 2000s.

The public housing community in uptown Charlotte was fairly new, but the environment could be dicey for Davis if he wasn’t careful. There was crime, theft, addiction and “just people you know, smoking weed or dealing drugs,” he said.

Now 38, Davis said he had a near miss once: he inadvertently came across a box in a park near his home

that had drugs in it. He thought it was a box of white packing material.

“I remember a guy pulling out a gun and ‘he said what the f--- are you doing?’ And then he said ‘get out of here.’ That was a turning point,” Davis said.

Already a standout track runner from years of doing AAU competitions by the time he attended Providence High School, Davis knew he needed to keep his eyes on the prize — an athletic scholarship for college.

“The only way to stay out of trouble was to run track,” he told the Charlotte Observer. “I just knew I needed to stay busy.”

Midway through high school, Davis

announced to family members he set his sights on North Carolina Central University.

Many people living in housing authority properties knew about John Crawford and the scholarship he launched.

“My mom went into the office where we lived and she asked about any scholarship funds,” Davis said. “I was already seeking scholarships for track, but we needed additional ones, right, because it didn’t cover a full scholarship to North Carolina Central.”

Beyond applying and being awarded a scholarship from the Greater Steps Scholars, Davis said the key for him

was the connections he made and the lifelong mentoring.

Coming into the family of scholars and meeting Crawford opened doors for Davis, who graduated North Carolina Central University in 2008 with a degree in business. He parlayed that experience into a career as a sports agent. While in the scholars program, he became a speaker for the organization and a mentor.

“Where will you ever make sound (and) solid connections, like if you don’t seek educational attainment?” he said.

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