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20 Students Who Work Hard and Dream Big Win Times Scholarships

By FERNANDA SANTOS

To Feruz Erizku, the griminess of the Andrew Jackson Houses in the South Bronx has been a source of both despair and drive. In the morning, as she makes her way to school, Ms. Erizku stares at the cigarette butts on the elevator floor, smells the marijuana that wafts from some apartment doors, strolls past young men who seem void of purpose. She wonders: Is this the end of the road?

"If I want to get out of this place," Ms. Erizku said one recent morning, "I have to do well in school." Ms. Erizku, 17, moved here from Ethiopia with her mother and two siblings in 1997, unable to speak English but full of expectations for a better life.

She has gone on to earn a place in the National Honor Society at DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, join a program for as-

piring scientists sponsored by the University of Vermont, log 100 hours of community service at the Park Slope Senior Center, where her father works, and earn early admission to Princeton University, which she will attend this fall. She also scored 630, out of a possible 800, on her verbal SAT and earned a 96.1 cumulative grade-point average, the second highest in a graduating class of 763.

Ms. Erizku has capped her impressive résumé with another achievement: winning a college scholarship from The New York Times.

She and 19 other high school seniors will receive a four-year scholarship of up to \$30,000, a six-week summer job at The New York Times Company and a laptop computer. The students are also paired with mentors from The Times and offered advice during their time in college from Roger

Lehecka, an educational consultant and former dean of students at Columbia College, the undergraduate liberal arts school at Columbia University.

Some 1,300 students from about 300 public, private and parochial schools in New York City applied for the scholarships this year. A two-month preselection process whittled that number to 157, and then, in late January, a group of editors and reporters from The Times, as well as former scholarship recipients, selected 37 finalists. The winners were chosen last month after a weeklong round of interviews.

"The extreme hardships these kids have been subjected to have not pushed them down a spiral of self-pity, and that's just special," said Eda Pepi, a member of the selection committee and a Times scholar in 2002 who graduated from Harvard University last spring. "Their stories are testament

of all the potential that kids have at that age, and of their amazing willingness to dream, to hope and to have faith that you can accomplish things, no matter how hard life might be."

(Another past scholarship winner, Anahad O'Connor, participated in the selection for the second consecutive year. Mr. O'Connor, 25, is a Yale University graduate and a reporter for The Times.)

Bianca Farrell, 18, who lives at the Frederick Douglass Houses on the Upper West Side and is graduating in the spring from Aquinas High School in the Bronx, said she hopes to move to Japan after college to design video games, which have been her passion — and obsession — since she got her first PlayStation at the age of 8. During win-

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Photo by Washington Post for The New York Times

Times Scholarship winners, first row, from left, Amanda Nadal, Jahmil Eady, Sana Khalid, Stacey Murray, Feruz Erizku, Emilyn Sosa and Sarah Taslima; center row, Ernest Meadows, Jayson Jones, Davia Steele, Evans Amoah, Joanne Nurse, Sonal Noticewala and Michelle Reyes; back row, Bianca Farrell, Reginald Askew, Harmain Khan, Dorothy Luczak, Luis E. Soto and Imad Harsouni.

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ter break this year, Ms. Farrell, who has earned early admission to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, used a few books and Web sites to teach herself the 46 characters of Japan's hiragana writing system, which is full of loops and curves and is the first one learned by Japanese children in school.

"I can read it well," she said with pride. "I might have to go to the dictionary here and there to find out what the characters mean, but once college starts, I should be fluent."

Having lost her father to gun violence while she was a toddler, Ms. Farrell was brought up by her mother, who gave up her own chance at higher education after her daughter was born.

"When I was young, my mother made education the No. 1 priority in my life. She taught me how to read with 'Hooked on Phonics.' She pushed me to keep up with my homework," Ms. Farrell said. "She'd always say, 'People can take anything from you, but never your education.'"

That's been my motto ever since."

Another of this year's winners, Harmain Khan, 17, of Staten Island, was a sophomore when he joined a scientific research team from Williams College probing reptilian teeth from an archaeological dig in India to reconstruct the prehistoric environment and migration patterns of crocodiles. His work earned him first place in the Intel International Science and Engineering Fair last year, among other honors, and was scheduled for publication in "The Journal of Human Evolution."

The research required Mr. Khan to spend eight hours commuting to a lab in Nassau County. He used the time to study Russian and write his physics and lab papers. Mr. Khan tackled homework during lunch and free periods, he said, because he devotes a few hours each day to helping his mother, who has cancer and lupus, with household chores.

In the spring, Mr. Khan will be graduating from Staten Island Technical High School with a 98.0 grade-point average and gearing up to study biochemistry and, later, medicine in college, preferably at Har-

vard. Mr. Khan, who was born in Pakistan, hopes one day to join Doctors Without Borders and care for the poor when disaster strikes.

He set that goal last year, he said, after traveling to his native country to deliver supplies to victims of the 2005 earthquake. He bought the items with \$6,000 he raised in New York by knocking on doors and holding food sales at mosques.

The New York Times College Scholarship Program started in 1999, when six students received awards. Since then, it has helped pay for the college educations of 180 young New Yorkers.

The scholarships are funded by The New York Times Company Foundation, contributions from readers and an endowment started with a grant from the Starr Foundation.

The program also recognizes teachers who inspired the scholarship winners. Each student is allowed to nominate a mentor for a \$3,000 award provided by Kathleen and Ernest Abrahamson. Mr. Abrahamson is an engineer who has donated hundreds of thousands of dol-

lars to send students to college.

Ms. Erizku, the Ethiopian immigrant, said the scholarship is the first step in her plan to give her family the life they dreamed of when they settled in their new country. Her father was the first to arrive in the United States, fleeing political persecution. Ms. Erizku, her mother and siblings joined him two years later, moving into a neighborhood of immigrants on the northern end of the Bronx where everyone talked about the future with hope.

With their modest income — Ms. Erizku's mother is a housekeeper and her father a custodian — and with relatives to support back home the family had to move into public housing to stay afloat. Suddenly, Ms. Erizku said, the poverty they had fought to escape in Ethiopia once again defined their existence.

She strived to learn English and whatever else she could. She devoured scientific journals, listened to teachers and learned from neighbors.

"Victory is sweeter," she said "when you're at the bottom and have to claw your way to the top."