

From tragedy, opportunity is born

Scholarships honouring murdered youth help urban students access higher education

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The student residence at Centennial College's Scarborough campus is just across town from the public housing building where Coy Peart spent his high school years.

But it's a world away from the poverty, violence and feelings of hopelessness that dog too many youth from his old neighbourhood.

"It's a whole different ball game," says Peart, 19, in his first semester at Centennial's Progress campus on a \$2,000 scholarship from For Youth Initiative, a program run by youth from the Keele St. and Eglinton Ave. W. area.

"Everyone on campus is here for the same reason: To learn. It's not like high school where someone is always asking you to cut class, hang out or whatever," he says.

Unlike scholarships that stress academics, the FYI award recognizes leadership and volunteerism, says Shahina Sayani, who chairs the FYI scholarship committee.

"By helping these young people get a better education, it helps the community help itself," she adds.

The award also commemorates former FYI participants Jamal Hemmings and Amon Beckles, shot and killed in November 2005 after the so-called Summer of the Gun.

Beckles' murder — outside a Toronto church during Hemmings' funeral — rocked the city and had a profound affect on area youth, many of whom were present.

Sayani and FYI staff set out to find ways for the community to heal.

"All of us wanted to do something really positive," she says. "And one of the things we heard was how difficult it is to access (higher) education in this community. There are



AARON LYNETT/TORONTO STAR

Scholarship winners Aaron Henry, left, and Coy Peart in front of a mural commemorating Jamal Hemmings and Amon Beckles, who were killed in 2005.

so many barriers."

So, the youth decided to create a scholarship program in the name of their friends.

FYI raised \$5,000 and handed out two scholarships of \$2,000 and one for \$1,000 in August.

Although Peart lived for basketball and other sports during his years at Runnymede Collegiate, he's sticking to books at Centennial, where he is enrolled in the child and youth worker program. And he smiles broadly as he reports he's getting As on many assignments.

The opportunity for post-second-

ary education — and the fact the community believed in him — has touched the outgoing six-footer, a volunteer in area sports programs.

"It was saying to me: 'Go ahead, Coy, pursue your dreams and come back to us with your new skills to help others,'" he says.

Aaron Henry, 19, the other \$2,000 award winner, has completed his first semester at York University and is working toward a bachelor of arts in Latin American and Caribbean studies and political science.

His goal is to study law, perhaps get into politics in the Bahamas,

where he grew up, or work as a diplomat.

Henry, who immigrated to Canada with his family in 2006, feels a responsibility to give back to the Toronto community that embraced him with the scholarship.

"This is my second home and it's quite natural and sensible for me to start here," he says.

For Jomo McCormack, the \$1,000 FYI scholarship is propelling him towards his dream.

Home after his first semester in the University of Waterloo's joint geography and aviation program,

the 18-year-old former school council president at York Memorial Collegiate says he has wanted to fly for as long as he can remember.

Growing up in Jamaica, the chances of studying aviation were slim, he says.

There have been hurdles here, too. Since immigrating to Canada with his family in 2003, he has felt the stigma of being a black youth from a rough part of town.

"The problem is that a lot of us tend to let these things hold us back," McCormack says. "But I use it to push forward."

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