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FROM TOUGH STARTS, ENDLESS POTENTIAL ONE IS A FOSTER KID. ONE WAS SENT BACK TO MEXICO WITH HIS MOTHER. ANOTHER WAS HOMELESS. BUT 3 ST. PAUL STUDENTS PERSEVERED TO SUCCEED IN SCHOOL AND WIN OPTIMIST CLUB SCHOLARSHIPS.

Author: Ruben Rosario

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AWARD COLUMN STUDENT

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Get a load of some of the Saintry City's unsung young beacons of light:

By age 6, DeShawn Woods was already a two-year veteran of the state foster care system, a boy who was never adopted and has never met his father.

At the same age, Krisna Nhul was old enough to start asking why his father, tortured by the Khmer Rouge, had scars on his back and woke up screaming at night. And Edwin Rosas, born in California, was the same age when he followed his deported and cancer-stricken mother to Mexico.

Eleven years later, the three St. Paul youths are excelling in school and juggling jobs and other duties in spite of tough family issues and other obstacles.

Once stuck in special-education classes, Woods is maintaining a 3.31 GPA at Central High School while taking advanced courses through the International Baccalaureate and Quest programs.

Rosas, who holds a 3.86 GPA at Johnson Senior High School, is captain of the varsity soccer team and a promising violinist with the school's orchestra and has lettered in cross country, wrestling and track.

Nhul, a fellow Johnsonite, is the only student in the school accepted to the University of Minnesota's Post Secondary Education Opportunity program. Ranked in the top 10 academically in his school, Nhul delivers pizzas to help his parents and five siblings.

The three are among 15 city high school seniors awarded \$1,500 college scholarships from the Optimist Club of St. Paul.

"We feel these young adults deserve public recognition and praise for their hard work while facing adversity," says John Tillotson, a club member and first vice president for wealth management at Smith Barney's St. Paul division. "As these kids have overcome personal hardship, they become significant role models to others, strengthening our community."

The scholarships, which will be formally presented at a dinner Wednesday, are given to mostly poor and working-class city youths who are excelling in academics and after-school programs while overcoming personal or family hardships.

Five area schools -- Augsburg College, the College of St. Catherine, Hamline University,

Macalester College and the University of St. Thomas -- continue to pledge to annually match and renew the award amount for any of the recipients who are admitted to and attend their schools. The club has awarded more than \$172,000 in scholarships to area youths since 1998.

GROUNDED

Woods was 4 when child-protection investigators removed him and two sisters, ages 5 and 6, from their mother's home. Woods said he was told by relatives it stemmed from allegations of sexual abuse against the girls by his mother's then-boyfriend.

He spent nearly six years with the younger of the two sisters in a foster home, where they were once grounded for an entire summer as punishment. They were removed from that home after Woods showed up at school with a scar from a belt-buckle beating. He spent the next five years with a local church pastor and his wife.

"What I liked about their home is that it was the first time I actually had structure," he tells me during a break from school. "I had a male role model, and I had a female role model."

He did not see his mother, who lives in Minneapolis, for more than 10 years. They reconnected by phone two years ago.

"But I hold no anger toward her," he says. "She was, what, 15, 16, when she had my first sister. She was but a child raising another child."

Woods, who wants to study broadcasting and own his own media production company like Oprah Winfrey does, lives with a foster mother he calls "Aunt Elaine."

He will retain foster-care medical benefits and won't "age" out of the system as long as he attends college. He has applied to several, including Winona State and Minnesota State (Mankato). His main challenge is obtaining other scholarships and financial aid.

"Right now, I have \$1,500 for college," he says. "That's better than the zero I had before."

Dia Yang, Woods' school guidance counselor, has no doubt he will leap that hurdle.

"DeShawn went from performing behind his peers and needing special-education services to taking honors classes by his sophomore year," she wrote in a nomination letter. "No matter how hard the road has been for him, he is determined to go the extra mile to improve his skills."

TORTURE AND ESCAPE

Krisna Nhul's father was working for the Cambodian government when the Khmer Rouge took over. His father was tortured and burned on his back by Pol Pot's thugs. Nhul's oldest brother, Chan, now 25, suffered permanent brain damage after the then-3-year-old was struck in the head with an unknown object by a Khmer Rouge soldier. His mother was pregnant at the time with another son, who suffers from autism.

The family escaped to a refugee camp in Thailand. They relocated here 21 years ago but were homeless for a time.

Nhul's father suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and depression; his mother had throat cancer.

Nhul is proud of his father, who works at a metal parts shop in Lakeville and often comes home with cut and bleeding hands. The man doesn't complain. He just does.

"My parents, they just don't want me to go through the hardships they went through," Nhul tells me as we sit in the office of Dan Kennedy, the school's guidance counselor. "What they've been through, it just motivates me to do more, to surpass expectations."

Besides taking college courses in his senior year, Nhul volunteers at Sun Ray Library, reading to children. He has been on the A honor roll throughout high school and works part time for a Paisano's pizza outfit in Woodbury.

He calls Kennedy a "second father" who has worked after school and on weekends to help Nhul

land the selective college course as well as apply for college scholarships.

Kennedy apparently has been a busy agent on behalf of students: Johnson High School seniors account for an impressive eight of the 15! Optimist Club scholarship winners.

"I worked at a suburban district, and those kids were also planning to go to college," Kennedy says. "But with these kids, it's different. College is almost like survival, a necessary lifeline not only for themselves but for their whole family."

Nhul, who plans to pursue a career in engineering, got good news this week: He was accepted by the University of Minnesota's Institute of Technology.

HOME AGAIN

Edwin Rosas' parents were migrant and factory workers. But a snafu in his mother's working papers led to her deportation 11 years ago. At the time, she was diagnosed with cancer in her kidneys and lungs.

"I thought my mother was going to die," Rosas recalls. He and another U.S.-born brother were sent to live with their mother while she underwent cancer treatment.

His father, who remained here working, launched an effort to bring the family back. Rosas forgot his English and then had to relearn it after both parents became permanent U.S. residents. His mother's cancer is in remission.

Rosas says the family's move to Minnesota eight years ago was the first time he felt a sense of permanence.

"Before that, we just moved from place to place," he says.

Besides tutoring elementary-school kids, Rosas volunteers at Sacred Heart Church and was awarded a "superior" rating in a violin competition this year.

He plans to apply to the University of Minnesota and the University of St. Thomas and pursue a career as a high school teacher of math, his strongest and favorite subject. He is also looking for a job.

"My father was laid off recently from a mattress factory where he works in St. Paul because of the economy," Rosas says. "I have to help out."

Kennedy believes Rosas, like the others, will persevere, with some help.

"It's really motivating to hear these stories as well as rewarding for me trying to help them," he says. "They're all great students few people know about."

A few more do now.

PREVIOUS WINNERS

Other Optimist Club of St. Paul college scholarship winners include:

- Maisee Heurh; Fee Moua; Kia Lor, Sterling Nichols, Luis Paniagua and Vong Pha -- all from Johnson High School.
- Katie Reavely, Arlington High School
- Qiaodan Jin Stone and Carrieal Sykes, Como Park High School
- Kristin Hogan and Joel Reiter, Harding High School
- Nikia Davis, St. Paul Open School

To learn more about the Optimist Club of St. Paul, go to stpaulfriends.com. To read previous columns on past winners, go to twincities.com.

Ruben Rosario can be reached at rrosario@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-5454.

Caption:

6 Photos

- 1) DESHAWN WOODS - CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL
- 2) EDWIN ROSAS - JOHNSON SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

3) KRISNA NHUL - JOHNSON SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

4) PIONEER PRESS: JEAN PIERI

DeShawn Woods, a senior at St. Paul's Central High School, runs into Najanique Crowe in the hallway between classes Thursday. Woods, who was removed from his mother's home at age 4, has a 3.31 GPA at Central and wants to study broadcasting.

5) PIONEER PRESS: MATT MEAD

Edwin Rosas, a U.S.-born son of Mexican immigrants, plays violin during band rehearsal Thursday at Johnson Senior High School in St. Paul. Rosas has lettered in wrestling and is the volleyball team captain.

6) PIONEER PRESS: JOHN DOMAN

Krisna Nhul goes over his notes before the start of a math class in Vincent Hall at the University of Minnesota's Minneapolis campus Thursday morning. His family escaped Cambodia's Khmer Rouge and relocated here 21 years ago.

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