

Scholarships help teens from families gripped by addiction

By Peter Korn, The Portland Tribune

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Recipients must show they're survivors and giving back to others

When Greg Stone decided to start a scholarship fund for teens suffering from addiction, he didn't do the obvious — give grants to teens who were recovering alcoholics or drug addicts. Instead Stone decided the fund would provide college money for teens growing up with parents or guardians who were addicts.

Stone, the longtime director of the Men's Residential Center run by Volunteers of America in Northeast Portland, grew up with a father who was both an alcoholic and violent. His background could have sent him down the same path. It didn't. "That motivated me to be of service," he says.

So when Stone became inspired to set up the Al Forthan Memorial Scholarship eight years ago (more about that later), his choice for winnowing down a long list of potential recipients to the one Oregon teen who would get a \$10,000 scholarship each year made perfect sense.

"There are a hundred kids out there who have had a bad life," Stone says. "We're really trying to honor and support kids who come from these families where life has not been fair to them, but they have become extremely resilient at surviving and giving back."

This year's winner will be introduced April 30 at the VOA's annual banquet, which is open to the public. The scholarship fund has grown so that this year, in addition to the Forthan scholarship, 37 other teens who entered the competition will receive college scholarships ranging from \$500 to \$4,000.

Now about that inspiration. Fifty years ago, Forthan was one of those teens from a disadvantaged background. He graduated from Jefferson High School in 1963 and became a major player in the Northeast Portland drug-dealing community, according to Stone. Stone says Forthan served nine separate prison sentences and had a long-time heroin addiction.

In 1992, Forthan came to Stone's rehab center — as do all of its residents who are Multnomah County probationers and parolees — as part of a court order. He got clean, and then he got educated. He earned Portland Community College certification as an alcohol and drug counselor, and he became the first former client to work at the VOA center, counseling addicts there for 10 years before his death in 2006, 14 years clean and sober.

Forthan was an iconic figure at the men's center, laboring up the steps to the second-floor dorm rooms, oxygen tank at his side. Three days before he died, Stone says, Forthan, in hospice care, led a bedside Narcotics Anonymous meeting with about 10 addicts, his usual group of recovering black men.

That same night, Stone went home and had the idea to start the college scholarship fund to honor Forthan's legacy, and his journey.

"Education is the great equalizer for kids who don't have a fair shake in life," Stone says. "Watching Al speak and seeing him change his own life, I saw that."

Applicants for the Forthan scholarship — this year there were 83 — are required to write essays explaining not only their achievements and the barriers they have had to overcome, but also how they have started giving back to their communities. Stone says he wasn't simply looking for hard-luck stories, but a way to distinguish those who already have shown the grit to get past a childhood lived amid addiction.

This year's Forthan winner, who asked that his name be withheld, already has volunteered 192 hours translating Spanish at a medical clinic, 560 hours as a teen outdoor leader at a summer science camp, and 340 hours as a volunteer math tutor. Accepted at Oregon State University, he needed money to live on campus. His alcoholic father would "squeeze my arm really hard and hit and kick me when he got angry. He would also tell me he wished I wasn't in his life," according to his application.

That father has been absent from his life for years and does not pay child support; his mother is disabled.

Here is an excerpt from his application: “I tried to be the best in football, basketball, wrestling, weightlifting, cross country, and track and field. I tried to be the best violinist in the orchestras I participated in. I spent my free time and weekends studying hard, so I could get straight A’s in all my classes. Yet no matter how much I accomplished, I never felt like I could prove myself. I realized that I had an irrational anxiety: If I wasn’t the best, I was worth nothing at all.

“As some time passed, I reflected on my life, including my childhood, and I discovered the roots of my anxiety. My father instilled a fear in me that I was worthless, and I might get beaten or killed. I felt scared while thinking of the past, but I realized that my anxiety was irrational since my father was now out of my life. I finally began to appreciate all the activities and academic work I have done. I realized that I could help other people, that I could figure things out, and that I could shape a better world for myself. I have overcome the fear that my father inflicted on me as a child, and I will continue to contribute to the well being of the world and the people around me through volunteering, music, and academic study.”

Stone figures that if Forthan could listen to the young man about to receive a scholarship in his name on April 30, he’d be nodding his head in approval.

The VOA awards banquet for Al Forthan scholarship winners will be held 5 p.m. April 30, at the New Song Community Church, 220 N.E. Russell St. The event is free, but those planning to attend should make reservations through kyates@voaor.org or call 503-802-0299.

Donations to the scholarship fund can be made at the banquet, or at voaor.org.