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Alger awards: Adversity, hard work bring success

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Just the "A's" in the membership list of the Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans represent a cross-section of American greatness. They include Hank Aaron, baseball's true all-time home-run king; Buzz Aldrin, the second man to walk on the moon; Willy Amos, founder of Famous Amos Cookies; and poet Maya Angelou from my home state of Arkansas. And that's before you even get to the "B's."

The association, named for the 19th-century author of can-do youth novels, invites into its membership Americans — and now internationals — who overcome adversity through persistence and integrity, much like the characters in Alger's books. It was founded in 1947 to remind young people that the American Dream was still attainable thanks to the opportunities available in the free enterprise system. By next year, the group's 65th anniversary, it will have bestowed more than \$87 million in scholarships to deserving recipients who are on their way to writing their own success stories.

The young men in Alger's books triumph in part thanks to their hard work and determination and in part through the assistance of a caring mentor who recognizes their worthiness. In the same way, association members provide examples for scholarship recipients and mentor them so that they receive not only college funding but also the wisdom gleaned from their elders' experiences.

As in the past, this year's 12 inductees include high achievers from a variety of fields, including actor Leonardo DiCaprio, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and Roger Ailes, chairman and CEO of Fox News.

Ailes typifies the award. The son of a factory foreman, he had to battle hemophilia as a child. The disease, which causes extensive bleeding from even minor cuts, resulted in the arthritis that afflicts him today. And yet despite those health struggles, Ailes rose to the top of Republican politics and became a trusted presidential adviser. He later built Fox News into the top-rated 24-hour news channel, for which he has been deservedly well-compensated. He also gave me a chance to become a national news commentator, and for that I'll always be grateful.

The Horatio Alger Association is as important today as it was in 1947. The past few years have been tough enough for some to lose hope, but even in good times, there are many who question whether the American Dream really exists and whether or not freedom really works. Many see government as a tool to redistribute wealth rather than as a means of protecting our rights.

The best way to refute that is through the stories of Americans who have lived that dream. Instead of a 19th-century author spinning tales of American success, the foundation presents real-life examples of people who overcame their difficulties. Angelou, for instance, didn't speak for

five years as a child after she was molested and her attacker was killed. She eventually overcame that traumatic experience and became one of America's greatest wordsmiths, but her life told America's story better than even her most eloquent words.

Some today say our country's wealth is distributed inequitably. But the way to remedy that is not to subtract from the successful so that they have less. Instead, give those willing to work the tools they need to become successful themselves. Give them an education, an example to follow, and, most importantly, hope. Not hope that comes from the government. Hope that comes from their own achievements.

That's what the Horatio Alger Association does. Congratulations, Class of 2011!