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Irvington teen wins scholarship as she overcomes adversity

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IRVINGTON -- Marcella T. Worthen is finishing up her high school career with the usual teenage aspirations and preoccupations. There have been college applications to complete, plans to make for the senior prom and academic subjects to master.

But the Irvington High School senior differs from her peers in considerable ways. Marcella, 17, has lost two older siblings to terminal illnesses and is now helping to care for her mother, who last week had surgery to remove a cancerous mass from her lung.

"A lot of things happened. A lot of death happened," she said. "That's hard, especially with someone as close as my brother and sister."

Still, Marcella persisted in her school work: She is on track to earn a near straight-A average this year. For that, she was named among 104 recipients nationwide of a \$20,000 Horatio Alger National Scholarship to fund her college education.

Her English teacher this year, Chinedu Okoye, called Marcella her best student. "Academically, she's top of the list," Okoye said.

But independent of her scholarly bent, Okoye said, Marcella is also an "exceptional person."

"She takes nothing for granted," she said. "I'm sure any investment in her is worthwhile." Gail Lane, who teaches peer leadership at the high school, said Marcella has a tremendous sense of character and of herself.

"I know she's going to do great things," said Lane, who has known Marcella for three years. "Whatever she puts her mind to, she will achieve. We're blessed to have her."

Marcella, who has been accepted to St. Peter's College in Jersey City and Bloomfield College, is waiting to hear the outcome of her applications to Rutgers and William Paterson universities. She wants to major in biology and has aspirations to become a heart surgeon.

"It's not about the money," she said about her career track. "I just like helping people."

There's also a debt of gratitude to repay. The youngest of six children raised by her mother, Marcella said: "I want to make my mother proud,"

Although her life so far has been framed by tragedy, Worthen says it hasn't defined her.

"I would have worked as hard," she said. "I want to make something out of my life. I want to work hard to succeed."