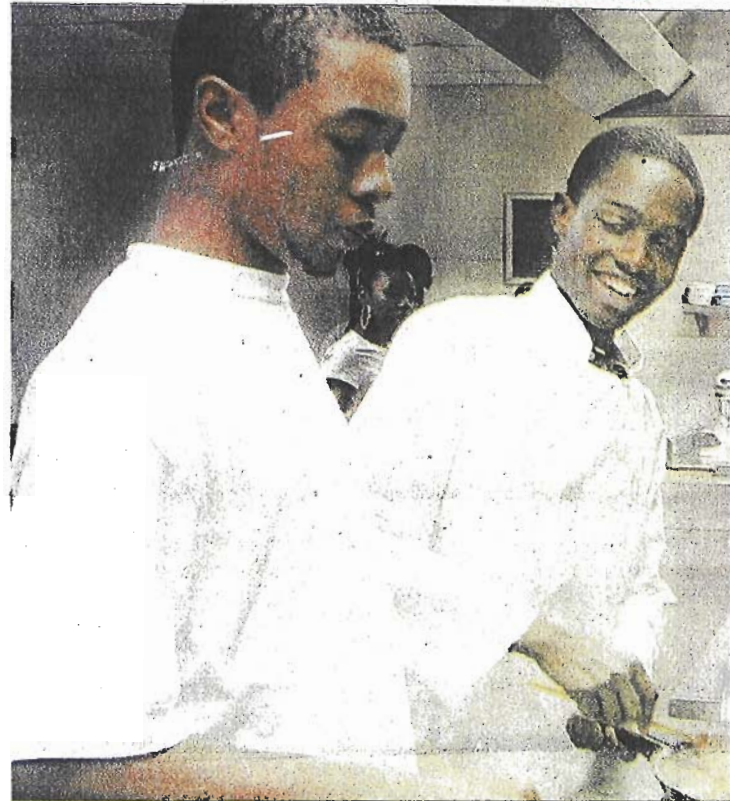


'Growing up I would think, "Why do I have to work so hard? Why couldn't I have the nice clothes and the fancy things rich people have?"'



'But growing up, you realize that that's not what's important. You learn to accept what you have and not to doubt yourself.'

FRONT PAGE



PHOTOS BY CHARLES SHUTE/The Sun News
Culinary arts students, Quinton Parson, (left) and Alphonso Beckmon stir-fry chicken during class at Carvers Bay High School. Beckmon is receiving the Horatio Alger National Scholarship.

Big dreams, big heart

Determined student awarded scholarship

BY ALIANA RAMOS
The Sun News

HEMINGWAY | Slice, Slice, Slice.

Ignoring the chaos of a full commercial kitchen behind him, 18-year-old Alphonso Beckmon wields his knife at just the right angle to cut slabs of chicken into thick slivers. There is no wavering, no stopping, just precision and a determination to get the task completed, and completed well.

That focus epitomizes the determination that already has guided him through many challenges: supporting his family, nursing his grandmother and literally driving his mother to drug rehabilitation.

It is the fuel that powers a laserlike pursuit of his dreams.

And it is the quality that spurred friends and educators to recommend him for a \$20,000 Horatio Alger National Scholarship, awarded to just students who have met adversity and have a strong desire to continue their education.



Alphonso Beckmon puts his books into his car before heading to work at KFC.

About the award

Namesake | Named for Horatio Alger Jr., author of more than 100 books that inspired young people from the post-Civil War era through the end of the 19th century. His stories showed that everyone, no matter how poor or powerless, can succeed if they persevere, do their best and try to do the right thing.

Scholarships | The Horatio Alger National Scholars Program assists high school students who have overcome great obstacles in their lives. Recipients receive \$20,000 to put toward college tuition.

Source: www.horatioalger.org

STUDENT

From Page 1A

Dreams become reality

Sprinkling seasoning over a colorful array of vegetables, chicken and rice on a grill, Beckmon — dressed in a white jacket — already looks like a professional chef.

Except he's not.

He is a Carvers Bay High School senior who, at the age of 16, became the sole breadwinner for his family while trying to fulfill a dream of attending a culinary arts college.

And not just any college. For Beckmon, the dream is \$20,000-a-year Johnson & Wales University, which has one of the nation's top culinary programs.

His teachers, friends and family worried that even if he got in, he would not be able to afford the tuition. His only source of financial support was his 35-hour-a-week job as a shift manager at a fast-food restaurant.

But on Jan. 11, Beckmon got a break. He learned he'd received the Horatio Alger National Scholarship, worth \$20,000. A week ago he got even better news: an acceptance letter from Johnson & Wales.

"I'm still in shock," Beckmon said Friday. "My doors are opening up slowly but surely." People who know Beckmon are not surprised.

"Whatever he said he's going to do, Alphonso's going to do it," said friend Shanta Reed, 19, a senior at Carvers Bay High School.

Teachers, other students, his mother and his twin brother all describe him the same way: a young man who goes after what he wants and pushes others to do the same. And he will tell you the same thing himself.

For example, when Alphonso was 16, he wanted a car.

"I was in high school, I didn't want to have to depend on other people to have to get around," he said.

He did not have the money, and his mother had just lost her job as a cook.

"At the time, my mom wasn't working and we had needs. So I said 'When I turn 16, I'm going to get a job,'" Beckmon said.

He did, landing a job as a cashier at a local KFC restaurant.

With it, he took over responsibility of paying the rent and utility bills. He supported his twin brother, his older sister and his mother as she struggled to overcome a drug addiction.

If he couldn't get a ride from a relative or friend, he would walk the seven miles to work. Often, he would hitch a ride. It was a year before he could buy a car of his own, a 2004 Chevy Cavalier.

"I was determined. I had a lot of family bills, I had to take care of the family. Yes, there were days that I wanted to turn back



PHOTOS BY CHARLES SLAVIN, The Sun News

Alphonso Beckmon, a senior at Carvers Bay High School, stops to give his mom, Lucinda Beckmon, who works at Carvers Bay Convenience Store, a hug before he heads to work at KFC. Beckmon was recently notified that he will attend Johnson & Wales University this fall, majoring in culinary arts.

But just as I would get ready to turn back, someone would come to give me a ride," he said.

And then he cracks a smile.

"Once, I almost got bit by a dog," he said.

Soon after starting his job, he began bugging his manager for more duties.

"I'm a fast learner, and I knew that I could take on more responsibility," Beckmon said.

A couple of months later he became a trainer for new employees.

"I kept putting pressure on my manager to let me prove to her that I could be dependable," he said.

After months of trying, Alphonso came into work one day to learn he would be closing the store as the shift supervisor.

Now, he supervises a crew of four and works from 4 p.m. until close five to six days a week, while still maintaining an A to B average.

Family first

You won't hear a word of bitterness about the duties he undertook at such a young age. Instead, he credits his circumstances with making him a better person.

"Growing up I would think, 'Why do I have to work so hard? Why couldn't I have the nice clothes and the fancy things rich people have?'"

"But growing up, you realize that that's not what's important. You learn to accept what you have and not to doubt yourself," he said.

His family has motivated and pushed him, Alphonso said. "Without them I don't think I would be so strong."

He pushes them equally hard. As he talks about his family, his whole demeanor changes.

He's instantly more alert, more on guard. While the friendly young man is still there, a steady resolve shines in his

eyes. He settles into his role as family guardian.

It was Alphonso who drove his mother, Lucinda Beckmon, to a rehabilitation center.

She said she had been doing drugs for about a year and was tired of feeling lost.

"One day I was just so tired of all of it. I just fell on my knees to pray," she said. "I kept hearing my children say to me 'One day we're going to come home and we're going to find you dead,'" she said.

She now has a job as a cook at a convenience store in Hemingway.

"He's been there for me since day one. He never gave up on me," she said.

And now he's pushing her to go back to cosmetology school.

"Oh, she's going to go back," he said, as if there's no doubt about it.

He takes the same tack with his 19-year-old sister, who became pregnant recently.

"I told her, despite having a baby, you're still going to college next year," Alphonso said.

For his fraternal twin brother Alphonso Beckmon, life would be markedly different without Alphonso. Born 2½ minutes after Alphonso, Alphonso Beckmon views his fraternal twin as an older brother.

"He's an outspoken brother. If I mess up, he gets down on me. If it wasn't for him, I don't know where I would be. I'd probably be locked up somewhere," he said.

Alphonso Beckmon, who also loves to cook, will instead pursue a career in technology. He said he's thinking about going to Horry-Georgetown Technical College, after graduation.

"I can cook anything. And I like to cook, but my brother loves it. I'm more into computers," he said.

The person who has probably had the biggest effect on Alphonso's life is his grandmother Mary Beckmon.

It was Mary Beckmon, a former church cook, who inspired his current career path.

"Growing up, I told my grandmother I would grow up to be a chef for her," he said.

Settling back in his chair, he talks about going to church fairs with his grandmother, who was famous for her sweet potato pie. He remembers learning how to cook as a small boy in her kitchen.

"He started cooking at 7," his grandmother said. "And, he could make everything I could make. He could cook fried chicken ... he could make steaks, potato salad," said Mary Beckmon, 65.

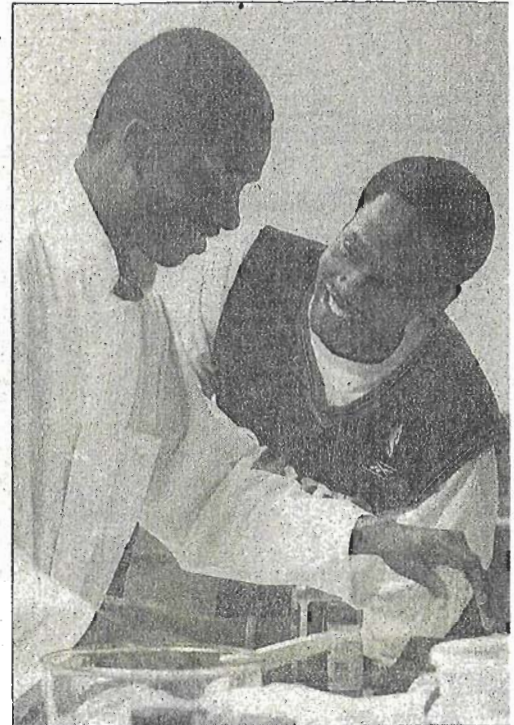
"When he was about 10 years old, I was having friends over and he said, 'Can I make dinner?' And he went into the cabinet and got the best dishes. I said, 'What you going to make?' And he said, 'Let it be a surprise.'"

"He made some rice, collard greens, fried chicken, potato salad, and macaroni and cheese and a large pitcher of iced tea. He said, 'Don't come in until I'm through,'" Mary Beckmon said.

Her friends were in awe that he was able to do all of that on his own, she said.

"Cooking is not the only thing he does. He's a very caring person. About three years ago I had to get my leg amputated, and when I came home, he was like a nurse."

"He dressed my leg. He was the only one could do it without passing out," she said. "He took care of me for about seven months. He would wrap my leg, take a bath, he would do anything I needed. Before he would go to school, he would braid my hair, dress my leg and



Alphonso Beckmon, (left) and his twin brother, Alonzo Beckmon, share a laugh as Alphonso cuts chicken for stir fry during their culinary arts class at Carvers Bay High School.

make breakfast. He would come back and do it all over again.

For me, he's one in a million," For Mary Beckmon, her grandson's future is a fulfillment of a dream she was not able to attain for herself.

"I think it's beautiful. I think he deserves it. I may be biased, but I am very proud of him."

"I've told him ever since he was a little boy, 'Fonso, you can do everything you want, you're just going to have to do everything you can to do it.'"

"I'm so proud, because I wasn't able to finish school," she said.

"I was the one who had to stay home and take care of my brothers and sisters while my mother went to work."

A brightening future

When talk turns to the future, Alphonso instantly brightens.

"On Sept. 4, I go to school," he says.

Never mind that he still has to figure out how to pay the additional \$60,000 he'll need to attend Johnson & Wales during the next four years.

"I was determined if I got accepted that I'm going to go no matter what. I don't care what people say," he said.

"I will be the first generation of my mother's children to go to college."

His conviction and ambition have inspired the staff of Carvers Bay High School to help him.

"He looked at me two days into my class — he was in 10th grade then — and he said 'I want to go to Johnson & Wales,'" said Rita Hutchinson, culinary arts instructor.

"I've even said to him, 'We

can start out at Horry Georgetown Tech and then transfer after two years.' He said, 'Maybe, but I want to go to Johnson & Wales,'" Hutchinson said.

Moved by his determination to attend the school, Hutchinson and other teachers mobilized to help bring his goal within reach.

English teacher Lisa Cribb worked with him to get his application ready for the Horatio Alger National Scholarship.

As a recipient, he will travel to Washington, D.C., in April to meet the other 105 winners and for an expense-paid four day tour inside tour into the branches of government and a tour of the sights.

In February, Alphonso plans to enter a national high school competition sponsored by Johnson & Wales.

If he wins, he will have a full ride. If he doesn't, he could get \$500 to \$1,000, Hutchinson said.

Hutchinson has also spoken to the recruiter with the university to put a financial aid package together for Alphonso.

"If anyone deserves this, he does," she said.

In about six months Alphonso will don a graduation robe and to receive his diploma and he'll do so with every expectation that his destination is Johnson & Wales University.

And after that? "First, I'll probably work on a cruise ship. Then, own my own restaurant. Then, have my own show on the Food Network."

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