

A goal to ‘dismantle bigotry and racism.’ Miami’s 5000 Role Models honors top students

BY DAVID OVALLE

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Forty-two high school seniors were honored with college scholarships upon completing the 5000 Role Models of Excellence mentoring program. The program, founded by Rep. Frederica Wilson, is celebrating its 27th year in the community. BY **EMILY MICHOT**

In eighth grade, Alexander Sanchez’s life was in turmoil.

His grandmother had passed away after battling dementia. A buddy from his football team was shot to death at a park in Homestead. Alexander stopped caring about his grades and was hanging out in Brownsville, “getting into trouble,” he recalled.

But at the urging of family, Alexander soon became part of the lauded 5000 Role Models of Excellence Project, the long-running mentoring program for young men of color in Miami-Dade County.

And on Monday, the 17-year-old Alexander was one of 42 students honored at the annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Scholarship Breakfast. As a parade of high-profile community leaders sat behind him, Alexander beamed.

Today, he’s a senior at Killian High School with a 4.1 GPA. He’s weighing whether to attend Florida State, the University of Central Florida or the University of Florida in Gainesville. His goal: study business.

“I want to become a sports agent,” he said.

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Alexander Sanchez, a senior from Miami Killian High School, looks at his 5000 Role Models of Excellence medal during the 27th annual 5000 Role Models of Excellence Project's Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Scholarship Breakfast on Jan. 20, 2020. Emily Michot EMICHOT@MIAMIHERALD.COM

Monday marked the 27th annual event for the mentoring and scholarship program founded by Miami Rep. Frederica Wilson, D-Miami. Since it began in 1993 — it was initially called 500 Role Models — the organization has blossomed, attracting involvement from many well-known people, including former President Barack Obama, Rev. Al Sharpton, and several entertainers and athletes.

Thousands of young men who were at-risk have graduated while participating in the program, Wilson told attendees, and more than \$10 million has been awarded in scholarships.

“Most of all, we have disrupted the school-to-prison pipeline,” Wilson said.

The event takes place on the morning of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, which also features a parade in Liberty City. The breakfast on Monday was an ornate affair in a sprawling ballroom at the DoubleTree Hilton convention center, involving a who's who of elected leaders and luminaries in South Florida's black community.

Many men wore suits and the signature 5000 Role Models' red-and-black ties. The podium was decorated with a giant Egyptian pharaoh bust. African dancers started off the festivities, and a line of giant sparklers whooshed into the air behind a row of luminaries seated on stage.

Among those on stage: Florida U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez, State Attorney Katherine Fernández Rundle, Miami-Dade County

Commissioners Audrey Edmonson and Jean Monestime, and Schools Superintendent Alberto Carvalho.

In the audience sat police chiefs, community leaders, teachers, students and media members.

Actor Larenz Tate, who plays a politician in the Starz show “Power,” implored people to “dismantle bigotry and racism across the world.” The theme of Monday’s event: marking 400 years since the slave trade began in what would become the United States.

Prominent Miami-Dade black judges — including Fred Seraphin, Daryl Trawick and Rodney Smith — who have served as mentors draped medallions on the honorees.



Jalon Howard-Sejour, a senior at Miami Norland Senior High, leads a group of Wilson Scholars through the crowd after receiving their 5000 Role Models of Excellence medals. Ross was one of 42 seniors from the Class of 2020 to be honored at the 27th annual 5000 Role Models of Excellence Project’s Dr. Martin Luther King Jr Scholarship Breakfast on Jan. 20, 2020. Emily Michot EMICHOT@MIAMIHERALD.COM

One of those receiving a scholarship was Derrick Adu-Boahene, 18, of Miami Edison High. A senior who grew up loving planes, he’s hoping to join the Air Force and one day become a pilot.

“It’s taught me to be a gentleman,” Derrick said of the 5000 Role Models program.

Another student, Luc Remy, 19, credited the mentoring program with helping him get back on track.

He failed the eighth grade after failing a history class. He kept sleeping through lessons, Luc remembered. “I don’ t blame the teacher for not passing me,” he said. “It turned out to be a blessing.”

Remy repeated the grade and will now graduate from Edison this year. He’s hoping to attend Miami Dade College or Florida International University to study physical therapy.

“And see where life takes me,” he said with a smile.



Alexander Sanchez, a senior at Miami Killian High School, holds the 5000 Role Models of Excellence medal he received during the 27th annual 5000 Role Models of Excellence Project’s Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Scholarship Breakfast. The breakfast was held Jan. 20, 2020, at the DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Miami Airport and Convention Center. EMILY MICHOT EMICHOT@MIAMIHERALD.COM