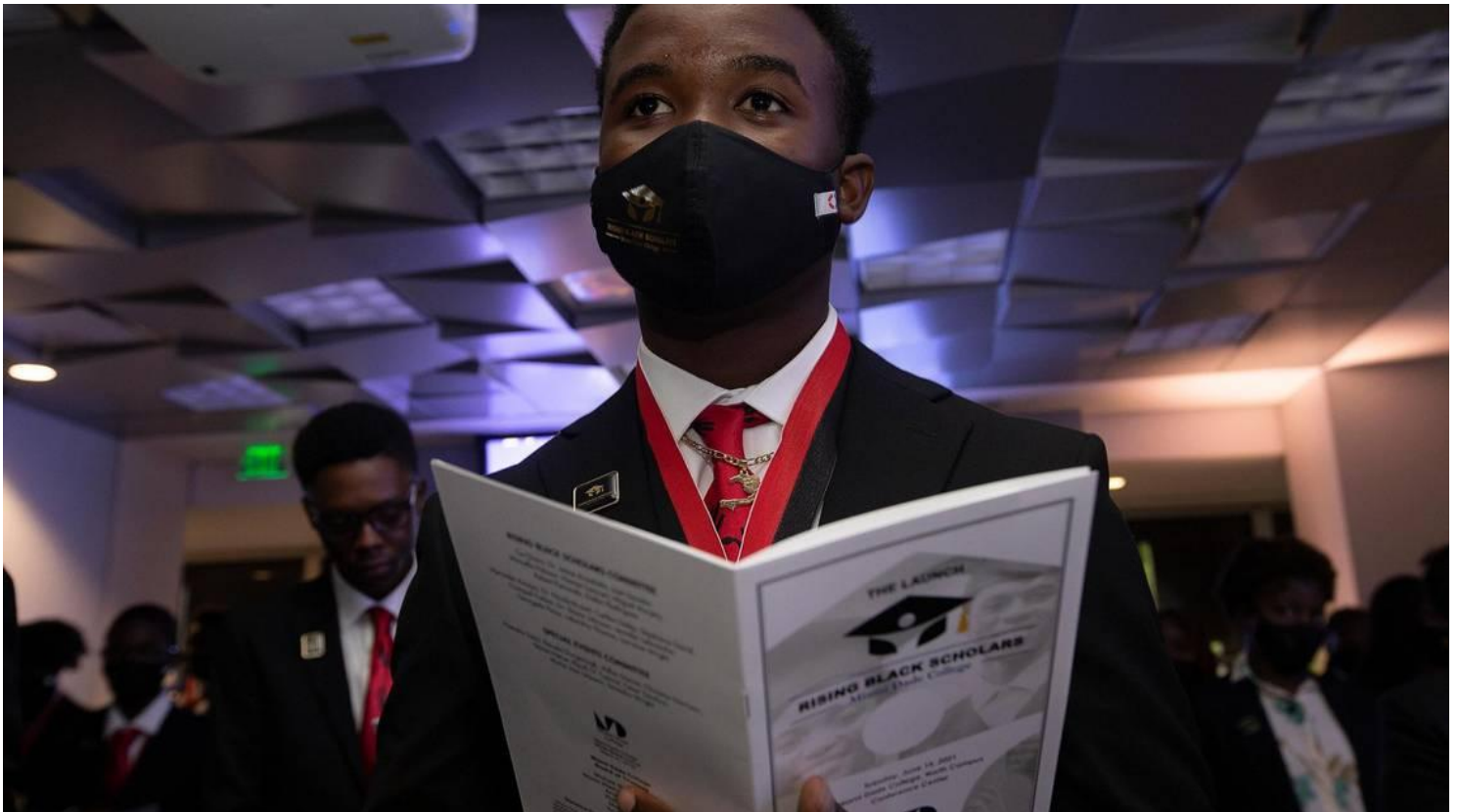


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‘We believe in your dreams’: 130 Black youths in new MDC program that aids students of color

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Kelson Baptiste, 17, from Homestead Senior High, who wants to study pre-med, at the event on Tuesday.
ALEXIA FODERE FOR MIAMI HERALD



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Miami Dade College began a new path of community uplift on Tuesday as it inaugurated 130 freshly graduated high school seniors into the new Rising Black Scholars Program that aims to aid the students financially and emotionally.

Nearly 400 family members, MDC faculty and staff, community leaders and scholars gathered at the Miami Dade College North Campus Conference Center.

In suits and formal dressing, 130 Black men and women beamed as they joined MDC's first class of the Rising Black Scholars Program.

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By earning a spot in the program, beating out more than 500 other competitors, these scholars will receive free tuition for up to 30 credits plus fees per year, book stipends, a laptop computer and scholarship opportunities. These scholars were given a laptop and a pin at the event.

Among the young scholars:

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Aaliyah Howard, a 17-year-old graduate at Miami Central Senior High School was beaming as she stood near the steps of the center.

Howard plans to double major in business and finance. Starting school on Monday, she plans to take three classes this summer. After a year, she plans to transfer to North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University.

“Me and my mom [were] like ‘how are we gonna pay for a new laptop? Gotta figure that out,” she said. “I’m happy I have the opportunity to take these classes.”



Students arrive at The 5000 Role Models Excellence Project inaugural class at MDC North Campus Conference Center on Tuesday June 6, 2021. Alexia Fodere *FOR MIAMI HERALD*

“One way or another I will have my education. I will pursue what I want to pursue.”

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Another young scholar who draws his inspiration from the program is Mike Alouidor, 20, who is majoring in nursing and

who plans to transfer to New York University.

Alouidor, a graduate of the Alonzo & Tracy Mourning Senior High School, was fulfilling his dream about being part of 5000 Role Models of Excellence MDC Alumni Chapter.

“I always look forward toward being a model or role model, basically,” Alouidor said. “[U.S. Rep.] Wilson is always telling us, ‘Keep pushing forward, keep looking forward. Don’t look back because the criminal justice system is not for us.’”

‘WE BELIEVE IN YOU’

The event on Tuesday night had a cast of noteworthy speakers who shared with the scholars stories of how they should find self-worth as well as how they should support themselves and each other.

Among these speakers were Felecia Hatcher, CEO of Black and Ambition, who gave the keynote and is a White House Champion of Change honoree; Judge Rodney Smith of the Southern District of Florida; MDC President Madeline Pumariega; and U.S. Rep. Frederica Wilson.

“We believe in you. We believe in your dreams,” Pumariega told scholars during the beginning of the ceremony. “Every single one of us at MDC... is invested in your success.”

Wilson said the program plays an important role for families who are unable to send students to college.



Jovnia Richard, 18 years old, from Homestead Senior High and who wants to study psychology, shows her new laptop to Nathaniel Forbes, 18 years old, from Robert Morgan Educational Center, who wants to study pre-med. They were part of the 5000 Role Models Excellence Project inaugural class at MDC North Campus Conference Center on Tuesday June 6, 2021. Alexia Fodere *FOR MIAMI HERALD*

Hatcher, who was honored as a 2014 Obama White House Champion of Change for STEM Access and Diversity and won more than [\\$130,000 toward college](#), told the students that her high school guidance counselor said college wasn't right for her.

So she urged students to stay on top of their work and ambition before she gave Carlton Daley, a graduate of TERRA Environmental Research Institute, \$20 to demonstrate how to take an opportunity.

“This life will suck you in and spit you out if you're not careful,” she said. “This college expects success.”

Said Rep. Wilson: “College tuition has outpaced middle-class paychecks, so it is hard for parents to send their kids to college. So, young men and young ladies, you are blessed.”

Judge Smith officially inaugurated the scholars.

And he told them that he was once like them and knew the importance of striving for success.

“I called myself the skinny kid from Liberty City with big dreams. I know what it is like to start from nothing, yet to have hopes and dreams,” he said. “You can be a judge instead of being judged by one.”

5000 ROLE MODELS OF EXCELLENCE

Among the inaugurated were 59 Black men who are part of the 5000 Role Models of Excellence Project, a long-running mentoring program founded by Wilson for young men of color in Miami-Dade.

These men, clad in new black suits and the project’s signature red tie, also had the honor of being inducted into the project’s inaugural 5000 Role Models of Excellence MDC Alumni Chapter.

Addressing the newly inducted men in the Alumni Chapter, Wilson said: “I had a hearing in Washington on a Zoom, and it said one in three of every Black man is either in the criminal justice system, coming out of [it] or going into [it.]

“The investment that we are making into your lives today, we know you have no place in that statistic.”

“My heart is with these little Black boys, and you can see tonight the difference,” Wilson said. “It is hard being a Black boy in America today.”

Another speaker at the event, Dr. Malou Harrison, the executive vice president and provost at MDC, said that the event put the spotlight on the school's Black students. Inducted students will be assigned a faculty advisor.

“We are providing, again, that opportunity to embrace our own communities, youth, and to provide the environment where they can flourish, they can reach their aspirations, and go out into the world and contribute as citizens in our community,” Harrison said.

“That’s what this is all about — lifting up our youth and lifting up our Black students.”

A PLAN AT MDC TO ADDRESS EQUITY GAPS

Harrison, along with the school's president and other staff, helped look at equity gaps at the institution between the number of Black students admitted and those who graduate. In January, they hatched a plan to address this gap.

Jaime Anzalotta, vice provost of student affairs and chief enrollment officer at MDC, said that the program is less about recruiting and more about retaining students.

“Success has to be catered individually,” he said.

Anzalotta added that there will be a parent-support program, in which he and other school officials meet once a month with the scholars' parents.

“I cannot speak for the past right, but I can speak of the future. I can speak that Miami Dade College is committed more than ever to bridging equity back in our county,” he said. “And we listened, the community speaks and data speaks very loudly.

“And we are responding to a dire need in our community and a need in our Black student population.”